ART FORM - ARTEFACT

A theoretical evaluation of the textile medium, its history and current use in Australian art and culture

by

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This thesis contains no material that has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgment is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed: Belinda Wright Date: 8 Sept 2003

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Abstract

My thesis explores the role of textile both as a medium in contemporary art practice and, historically, as an Australian social and cultural artefact. I argue that textile is intimately associated with the creation and maintenance of identity. As such, textile may be theorised as a technique of power within our social and political system. The thesis proposes a theory of power, based upon the theories of social scientist, Kenneth Boulding, and philosopher, Michel Foucault. A notion of power that is integrative, that inspires complicity on the basis of a common and ultimately rewarding identity, provides a fruitful context for the consideration of textile, a medium associated with both public and private spaces. I examine the uses of textile in social, religious, political and ceremonial systems (flags, banners, religious vestments and military regalia) as well as evaluating its traditionally recognised place as a domestic artefact.

Within contemporary art practice and theory, identity is a current issue. To a considerable extent this is a result of feminist theory and philosophy, which is firmly rooted in an analysis of contemporary society and the construction of identity within it. I explore the impact of feminist theory and its interaction with the textile arts, especially during the final quarter of the twentieth century. I consider in some depth the concept of space and place and its division into areas designated as public and private, as these ideas impact profoundly upon the issue of identity.

I examine the history of textile practice in Australia, by considering museum collections as well as historical examples of work made by embroiderers and lace makers, textile designers and makers of ceremonial and religious textile pieces. I consider its use as a cultural and political voice through banners, as used, for instance, by trade unions. Following on from this, I look at the inspirations of Australian textile artists and survey the effect of art galleries and their collecting policies on contemporary Australian textile art practice. The art/craft debate is revisited before examining the history and role of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial. The Biennial is discussed in tandem with an analysis of artist responses received to a questionnaire that I designed specifically for use in this thesis. Current developments in the Biennial and the questionnaire data are used as the barometer of Australian contemporary textile art development.

In summary, the thesis addresses the historical association of textile with issues of identity and power, and considers the ways in which contemporary artists work with the textile medium in the light of such associations.

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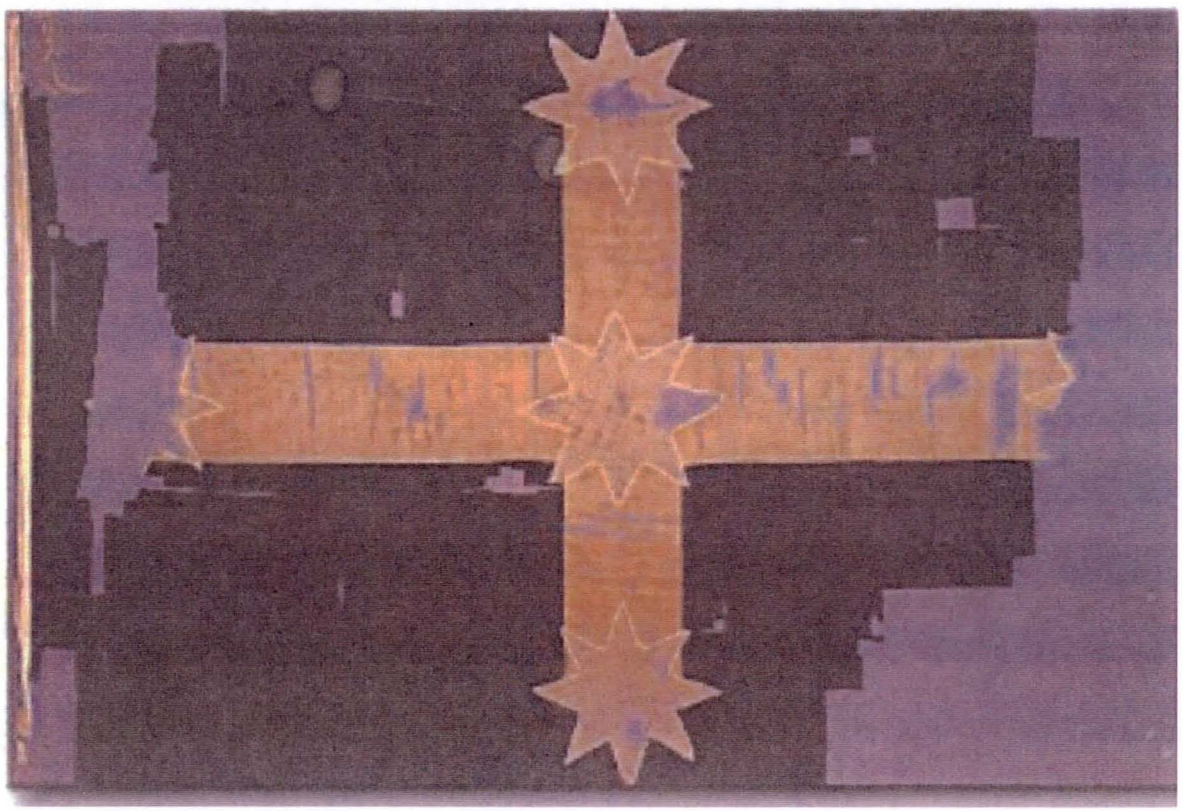

***Eureka Flag*, 1854s**
Collection of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery

INTRODUCTION

> A major component of material culture, textiles may be viewed as the products of technology, as cultural symbols, as works of art, and as items of trade. Indeed, the textile arts represent a fundamental human activity, as well as expressing symbolically much that is of value in any society.[1]
> Jennifer Harris

This thesis is an exploration of Australian textile art as it relates to the incidence of textile within the wider Australian society and culture, an investigation of its language and concerns in social, political and cultural terms. At this point I must emphasise that, although in the contemporary arts there is a close relationship between 'textile' and 'fibre', for my purposes, 'textile' is cloth and 'fibre' is plant-related or organic material.[2] My main focus is textile.

In considering textile art and its relationship with Australian culture I have undertaken an analysis of both in the light of some influential contemporary philosophical theory. As a result of their concentrated preoccupation with the concept of representation, Elizabeth Grosz posits the importance of contemporary French theorists for the visual arts in the following terms:

> Very often, their interests are not those of the art history specialist, but are preoccupied with the question of the relations between representations and cultural, social and political contexts and strategies. While such theory is certainly not *necessary* to, and often not even very *useful*, in the production or evaluation of art, nonetheless theory enables significant

[1] J. Harris (ed.), *5000 Years of Textiles*, British Museum Press, London, 1993, p.13.
[2] See also Chapter Seven of this thesis.

> political and social questions about modes of representation to be posed in ways that might be helpful for those interested in the politics of art.[3]

Since I am interested in the politics of art, and since I will argue the particularly political nature of the textile medium, the theories of Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray and Kristeva have been relevant to my research. My aim is to develop a broad perspective that may be useful in the analysis of contemporary Australian art, which uses the medium of textile. This aim arose from my concern about an apparently single-minded characterisation of textile as predominantly a feminine interest and pursuit, and was further prompted by my interest in Western ceremonial textile – flags, banners, religious vestments etc. I began to consider the role such textile plays in our society. I began to wonder about its impact upon both men and women. What role do women play in the its development? What is the relationship between men and women, textile and ceremony in Australian society? Is it possible to analyse this relationship constructively rather than simply decrying a Western patriarchal society of which, arguably, Australia forms part?

Cultural and social analysis in Western philosophy has been constructed around a system of hegemonic dichotomies or binary oppositions which have served to structure theory about social organisation and, thus, to structure social organisation itself. The oppositions include male/female, public/private, reason/emotion and independence/dependence. The first element in each pair has traditionally been considered in a positive light and the second carries negative connotations. In a dichotomy that is a foundation of the structure of power relations, the first element is more highly valued than the second.[4] Discussion about textile has mirrored this kind of dichotomy in that it has been based upon a similar

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[3] E. Grosz, 'Feminist theory and the politics of art', in *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970–1990*, ed. C. Moore, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, p.139.

[4] S. James, 'The good-enough citizen: female citizenship and independence', in *Beyond Equality and Difference: Feminist Politics and Female Subjectivity*, eds G. Bock, & S. James, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 48. James writes of:

> liberal theory as built around a set of complementary dichotomies. Dominating these is an opposition between public and private. This is variously interpreted, but at least encompasses the divide between the overtly political institutions of society and the domestic sphere of the home and family. It is supported by a series of polarities between equality and difference, reason and emotion, man and woman, disinterest and interest, impartiality and partiality, independence and dependence. The first terms of these pairs characterize the public sphere, while the second serve to limit it by showing what it excludes; both invest it with authority, and contribute to a conception of what is and what is not of value in political life.

binary opposition, that of art/craft. In the past the discussion centred around whether textile-based work was deemed to be art and therefore original, intellectual and of a higher value, or craft and thus derivative, decorative and of less importance. Until the rise of feminism prompted a reappraisal of these binary oppositions and the nature of their relationship to the constitution of femaleness and femininity, textile was usually considered to be craft-based because it was essentially a female pursuit.[5] Consequently the narrow association of textile with the feminine and the decorative has militated against the appreciation of textile as art in the Western sense, since both these terms – the feminine and the decorative – denote 'lack'. An understanding of the nature of this perception of lack owes much to the advent of feminist writing and scholarship in the area of cultural theory, a scholarship which has become increasingly broad-ranging and influential.

If we wish to better comprehend the use of textile as a medium of expression in contemporary art practice, feminist theory, because of its deconstructive capabilities, is one possible starting point. I posit a reciprocity between feminist theory and theory about textile based on the close identification of textile with women, an identification initially traced by Rozsika Parker in her study of the history of embroidery and its relationship with the ideal of the feminine.[6] While tracing the development of embroidery use and technique by means of an analysis of English history and visual imagery, she addresses some complex issues about the essential nature of womanhood, perceptions of its proper place within culture and society, its relationship to power and patriarchal social structures. Her work has been of great interest and inspiration to feminist artists and those with an interest in textile. If feminism is concerned with unravelling preconceived notions of the feminine and the female in order to achieve a freedom from unreasonable constraints and restrictions, then the speculations of feminism may have the same potential for the practice and theory of textile as art. My thesis therefore undertakes an analysis of elements of feminist discourse and considers their influence on social and

[5] R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, The Women's Press, London, 1984, p.5: 'When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And crucially it is categorised as craft [...] The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft.'

political life and forms of cultural representation within Australia. My hope has been that insights gained as a result of the discourses of feminism would offer the opportunity for a more comprehensive appreciation of the value of textile as a medium for contemporary art practice.

However, my approach to this topic of textile as art medium has been two-fold: not only to consider contemporary textile art practice in terms of the impact of feminism, but also to look for other influences and concerns as evidenced by both historical record and current trends. I felt, initially, that an analysis of textile as predominantly a feminine/feminist concern, especially as pertaining primarily to the domestic domain, seemed limiting, overlooking its power and potential in a much broader social sense. It seemed to potentially confine the analysis within the binary oppositional nature of earlier philosophical theory. A major concern of mine has been the issue of power and its relationship to textile as a medium for representation. This concern with power certainly relates to feminist critiques of the characterisation of Woman in terms of her negative relationship to power, but the significant initial stimulus was my interest in the use of ceremonial textile in Western society and its relevance to the structures of power. My contention is that textile is, and has always been, a material of profound significance within society. It is a material artefact, which figures as an important element in societal structure in ways that often seem either to have been overlooked within contemporary theoretical analysis or to have been considered only fleetingly.

A reading of some of the theories of French philosopher, Michel Foucault, offered me a basis upon which to develop a broader theoretical approach to contemporary textile art. As a result, my focus has been on textile as a discourse, in the manner of Foucault's analysis, since for him the term 'discourse' would include art.[7] Foucault uses the concept of discourse as a means to interpret specific forms of power within the functioning of a society:

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[6] R. Parker., op. cit., 1984.
[7] E. Grosz, in Moore, op. cit., p.141.

> A discourse for Foucault is a way in which knowledge is articulated in society, by, for example, the various institutional forms which it takes. Knowledge produces and transmits power and includes social practices, ways of producing meaning, and all types of control. Things have no meaning outside their discourse, and each discourse is part of a wider network of discourses.[8]

Foucault is much more interested in *how* discourses function than in *why* they do so. He analyses how discourses are constructed:

> ...what a text does, how it acts, what it is used for. The production of all types of texts is not an indifferent matter in the operations of power. These 'texts', whether they are works of art, or written texts, are bound up within the order of power, not only or most interestingly, at a representational level, but in terms of their capacity to be harnessed and utilised, put to work in regimes of knowledge – power.[9]

He writes of systems of dispersion, discursive formations and their rules of formation – that is, the conditions of their existence, coexistence, maintenance, modifications and disappearance. He is not necessarily looking for those continuities that we feel should automatically form the basis of a discourse. In fact he feels that we must challenge such automatic acceptance of such basic themes as being prescriptive. Within his analysis, therefore, he has the desire to allow for the disruptions, transformations and interruptions to be found within the operation of a discursive technique. Ultimately he is less interested in their meaning and rather more concerned with the nature of the power wielded by such discursive techniques, the ways in which they are 'bound up within the order of power':

> His fascination with the interlocking of power and forms of knowledge is directed largely towards understanding how discourses can be used by power to inscribe, constitute and create bodies of particular types, with specific natures and capacities.[10]

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[8] E. Fernie, *Art History and its Methods*, Phaidon Press, London, 1995, p.334.
[9] E. Grosz, in Moore, op. cit., p.141.
[10] E. Grosz, ibid., p.141.

My argument is that the medium of textile fits Foucault's conception of a discursive technique in that it can be demonstrated as being 'bound up within the order of power'. Textiles, particularly ceremonial textiles, are powerful elements with strong historical traditions within many societies in terms of 'inscribing' and 'creating bodies of particular types'. Examples of this include textiles that are associated with religious ceremonies and significant social occasions such as weddings, christenings and funerals. In addition national flags and banners denote strong political and social affiliations. It is worth considering what role textiles such as these play in Australian society and what associated role women play in the development and use of such textile artefacts. Not to be ignored is the domestic textile and its relationship to power, social structure and tradition. What is the nature of the relationship between all these elements – textile, women, ceremony and power, domesticity and society? What is the role and influence of the binary oppositions of public and private, space and place, and how do they relate to notions of power? And what relationship does textile as a medium of contemporary art have with all these elements? How do the concepts of textile artists and the way they utilise textile as material relate to the everyday function of textile in contemporary life? In what ways does the medium of textile determine or limit its meaning as art? In the light of Foucault's theories of power I have tried to consider how textile as a discourse functions, how it is being rewritten and as the result of what particular influences.

In addition to considering the work of Foucault I conducted some primary research. Since galleries function as repositories of societal discourse in art terms, I contacted all State and regional galleries around Australia, including the National Gallery in Canberra, requesting information about textile or fibre-related artworks in their collection. I also requested information about any textile art exhibitions held in their gallery or contact details for artists. Although my focus has been on Australian textile art I have also on occasion discussed work by American feminist artists who have influenced Australian women artists. In relation to the sociological aspect of my research I tried to identify areas of textile use, production and evaluation that could not be designated feminine or only associated with women. To this end, I contacted museums, particularly military museums such as the War Memorial in Canberra, in an effort to ascertain whether they

held any textiles of significance in their collection. I had in mind flags and banners but I also hoped to find examples of other materials.

I considered costume less relevant to my research unless it was of a ceremonial nature. My interest was mainly to identify those forms of textile that unite people, that give them a sense of importance, a sense of communal identity – in other words, textiles associated with some sense of ritual. In this respect I was influenced by research into, for example, Islamic textile, Palestinian costume and Indonesian textile research, which discusses textile and its production and ceremonial use as being of prime importance to a culture as a whole.[11] While such research may discuss male and female preoccupations within the field, it has little to do with notions of femininity. Textile is solidly grounded in the social and cultural life of such societies. Consequently I wondered if it might be possible to consider in similar ways examples of textile as used in Australian society.[12]

Unfortunately there were considerable difficulties in developing this aspect of the research to any real extent. As Ian McShane, the Senior Curator of Australian Social History at the National Museum of Australia explained in his correspondence, the Museum's collection of textile artefacts is, in fact, quite huge.[13] Nonetheless I have been able to constructively utilise some of the information provided.

A significant primary resource in my discussion of contemporary Australian textile art was the analysis of a questionnaire, which I devised and administered to a cross-section of Australian textile artists with the cooperation of the organisers of a national textile symposium in Canberra in 1998. The artists were asked to provide information about their specific use of textile, their understanding of the textile tradition and its impact on their work, and their thoughts about the possibilities of textile as medium. The questionnaire, its methodology and the results are tabled in the appendices.

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[11] S. Weir, *Palestinian Costume*, British Museum Press, London, 1994 is one example of such research.
[12] I have not attempted any exploration of the subject of fashion. Although it may have a great deal to do with a sense of identity, it is an area of research in itself.
[13] I. McShane, Senior Curator, Australian Social History, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, personal correspondence, Oct. 1997. See also Chapter Four of this thesis.

One of the major outcomes of my research into the uses of textile has been the realisation that textile is a medium which in historical and social terms, is strongly associated with the creation and maintenance of identity. This becomes evident if we consider the ways in which textile forms part of everyday life, whether we speak of fashion, uniforms, interior furnishings or the ceremonial textiles that comprise our religious, political and social artefacts. Identity is also an issue of immediate concern within contemporary art practice and theory, and this is borne out by responses to the artist questionnaire.[14]

Feminist theory and philosophy is firmly rooted in an analysis of contemporary society and the construction of identity within it. Fundamental within these philosophies is the issue of power or empowerment. Consequently, I examine in some depth the development of feminist theory and its impact on the arts. Further to that, within the vast amount of scholarship encompassing analyses and understandings of individuality and identity, other foundational concepts are addressed, including the concept of space or place and its division into areas designated public and private. This is important when it is understood that, just as women are characterised in accordance with ideas of the relative value of public and private space and the power issues associated with them, so too, is textile.

In summary, then, this thesis posits the association of textile with issues of identity and power and considers the ways in which contemporary artists work with the textile medium in the light of such associations.

[14] Appendix 3: Questionnaire results, questions 5 and 6, no. 93: 'Identity issues – ideas around "place", "cultural identity".' Echoes of this answer can be found throughout the questionnaire and are discussed in the final chapters of this thesis.

Chapter One

WHAT THE FEMINIST WORE

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

***Women's Art Register Poster*, 1986**
Screenprint on Glopaque paper

Source: S. Kirby, *Sightlines: Women's Art and Feminist Perspectives in Australia*, Craftsman House, East Roseville, NSW, 1992.

Chapter One

WHAT THE FEMINIST WORE

The Nature of Feminism

Since I am suggesting that there are significant points of contact between feminist theory and theory about textile as a medium for representation, it is necessary to examine the nature of feminism in general terms before considering its influences on textile as a medium for contemporary art. Although feminism is defined as a political movement associated with the advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social and economic rights of women,[1] it is in fact distinguished by differing and sometimes contentious perspectives. An understanding of these perspectives facilitates an appreciation of the extensive contribution made by feminist theory to the terms and content of philosophical debate and the resulting possibilities for a reappraisal of the textile medium. The following analysis of these differing perspectives is based on an introduction to feminist theory written by Rosemarie Buikema.[2] She defines three separate positions that have been adopted by feminists regarding women and their situation within society. These positions revolve around theories of equality, of difference and of deconstruction, and, as will be seen, there are internal contradictions within each position.

The theory of *equality* revolves around those issues which women have seen as important in the struggle for equal opportunity, equal recognition and equal recompense. Simone de Beauvoir, writing first in 1949, characterised women as the second sex relative to men and, consequently, as oppressed and undervalued:

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[1] L. Brown (ed.), *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.
[2] R. Buikema, 'Windows in a round house: Feminist theory', in *Women's Studies and Culture*, eds R. Buikema & A. Smelik, Zed Books, London, 1995, pp. 3–13.

> ...women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men.[3]

De Beauvoir called for an emancipation of women both socially and culturally, which would bring them to a position of equal status with men. Her influence instigated action that was designed to give women freedom as individuals. However, it also stimulated a concern for women as a group and an ongoing analysis of those political and social structures which could be demonstrated as oppressive and harmful to that group. Thus feminists worked in two ways. Initially they set out to reinsert women as individuals into the social and cultural realm and so looked back in history for female figures to add to the existing, male-dominated historical canon. An argument gradually developed, however, that the historical canon has been constructed in line with a masculinist value system masquerading as a universal value system. This value system presupposes an autonomous, coherent, rational and universal human subject who exists prior to his/her social and cultural environment. It is a system which purports to address a gender-neutral subject under the guise of universality but which has been revealed as male-oriented in its derivation. While de Beauvoir believed that women were indeed autonomous, rational and self-reliant individuals responsible for their own lives, she espoused the notion that the value system of a patriarchal society represented women as Other and inferior to men. If women are represented in culture and society in limited ways, and then only through the eyes of men and by means of a value system which is derogatory, and if they are absent from public life on their own terms, this fact complicates the identity of women. It makes self-identification for women difficult to achieve. Who are their role models, who gives them self-belief, who is it that speaks on their behalf in the public space if they are denied access to it?

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[3] S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage, London, 1997, (original translation published 1953) translator's preface, p.9.

Feminists began to query not only the absence of women from the cultural, political and economic canon of public life, but also the veracity of existing representations of women. As a consequence, they attempted to empower women within societal structures that were not confined to those of the patriarchal system. They identified those structures which were open to women and that they felt could be used to combine and strengthen women as a force for political change. They espoused the theory of *difference*. They argued that women have alternative experiences of the world from men as a result of their different social positions and perspectives, and therefore react differently and have different forms of social, cultural and economic productivity than men. It must therefore be appreciated through different criteria. Since criteria for appreciating these experiences do not form part of the dominant male canon, they need to be developed.

However, this position came under early attack from within the feminist movement itself, as being guilty of universalising women as a group and failing to allow for those differences between women themselves that result from the structural elements of race, class, sexuality etc. This attack has generated wide-ranging discussions and differing opinions about the nature and formation of gender and sexuality. Theories of gender posit the view that femininity and masculinity are socially and culturally constructed, whereas theories of sexual difference are argued from a position, suggested by Freud but not strictly adhered to, that sexuality is determined by means of unconscious psychological processes which are different for boys and girls. Feminist theorists of difference reject political moves towards equality within the male canon because they argue that the structural foundations and the binary oppositional nature of this canon make it impossible for women and their lives to be assessed in any way other than negatively: the masculine norm and the terms associated with it will always be more highly valued. Amongst the more influential of these feminist theorists are the French philosophers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous who have worked to develop a specifically feminine mode of writing – *écriture féminine* – in which femininity is able to be represented within culture in a positive manner. It is a strategy presented as not simply an essentialist practice, but as a theoretical means of challenging and changing the dominant views of masculine and feminine.

This brings us to the third theoretical position, that of *deconstruction*. This theory, whose foremost exponent is Jacques Derrida, is influential with some feminist philosophers. Within this theory language is central, as it is through language that we make sense of the world. In other words, there is nothing outside the text and there is no pre-existing autonomous subject: 'the subject does not precede language but is decentred, incorporated in language, acquires significance in language'[4]. Meaning is derived from relationships, the constant relationship between one word and others. Meanings can be changed because they are not fixed and inherent in the text but constructed by the workings of ideology. What is marginal in the text can be instrumental in its deconstruction, in its demonstrated irrationality. The interest for feminism is that by this means it may be argued that femininity is a discursive construction and not exclusively related to biology. It need not be seen as natural and therefore incontrovertible. It means that the dichotomous and hierarchical structure of society, based upon the binary oppositions of male/female, culture/nature and mind/body may be undone. Both this theory and the practice of *écriture féminine* demonstrate the importance of language and text in the search for identity. They suggest possibilities for action in the task of undoing one-sided and unequivocal cultural representations.

The Social and Political Role of Textile

So what is the significance of all this for the subject of textile as art form or artefact? Cultural and social analysis has commonly been organised around the public/private dichotomy and its characteristic opposition of male and female subjects. In line with this dichotomy, it has been the custom within the Western world, as British historian Rozsika Parker argues in her influential text, *The Subversive Stitch*[5] to align the use of textile, both

[4] R. Buikema, op. cit., p.12.

[5] R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, The Women's Press, London, 1984, pp1-2. Parker provides examples of such characterisations in her opening chapter. As one example she references a British Government survey 'Social Trends' which 'revealed that the greatest difference between men and women was in sewing and knitting. Thirty-seven percent of women, but only two percent of men, had done some in an average week in the three months before they were interviewed for the survey.' She also discusses the role of social institutions such as schools and the impact of advertising to endorse the identification of women with the textile arts, particularly embroidery.

as a material and a practice, with the private domestic space, the practical as opposed to the intellectual, the decorative, the decorous and the feminine. This patriarchal ideological stance, characterises textile and textile techniques as being a domestic and suitably feminine preoccupation, entirely instinctive to the female sex, whose proper and natural place has been the private or domestic space. In line with de Beauvoir's analysis, it is a preoccupation defined as Other and inferior to the concerns of the male public domain. In reaction to this, a similar characterisation of textile as a predominantly feminine preoccupation appeared to take root within feminist rhetoric as part of its determination to redefine and politicise the domestic space, and, in so doing, to confound the public/private opposition. For example, the American feminist artist and painter, Judy Chicago, conceived 'The Dinner Party', first exhibited in 1979[6]. It consisted of a large triangular table covered with dinner place settings commemorating thirty-nine significant women in Western history. Each setting stood upon an embroidered table runner, each of which was stitched in the style and using the techniques of each woman's time. Thus the embroidered runners were used to contextualise each woman within history in a way that conflated both public and private persona. Feminist artists such as Chicago[7], determined to seek equality for women, have in this way devised strategies that involved identifying the contribution of women and using the different concerns and social structures connected with them as a means of empowerment. While historically, medieval embroidery was the preserve of both men and women, nineteenth century historians emphasised the close identification of women and textile. Such an identification has been maintained and in some ways strengthened, by some feminist artists, including Australia's Vivienne Binns[8], in ways that include theories of both equality and difference.

Both patriarchy and feminism seem, to some extent, to rely on an essentialist view of the nature of the textile medium. The essentialism/constructionism debate centres on

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[6] ibid, p209. Since its completion in 1979, the work has traveled to 15 venues in six countries and three continents. The work will become the centerpiece of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, opening in 2004. <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1167>

[7] The influence of American feminism was spread to Australia partly through a visit by American art critic, Lucy Lippard in 1975 when she was the Power Bequest Lecturer.

[8] Vivenne Binns, 'Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories' in C. Moore (ed.), *Dissonances: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, pp.71-79. This work is discussed in some detail in chapter three.

conflicting notions of how identity takes shape. Such concerns arise from philosophical debate about the nature of human consciousness and existence, debate fuelled by early philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke, Emmanuel Kant, as well as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan in the twentieth century. As a result of feminist engagement in the latter years of this century, the theories have become more extensively interlaced with the issues of sex and gender. In discussions on the nature of identity and gender and its role in the issues surrounding equality, French feminists such as Luce Irigaray[9], Helene Cixous[10] and Australians such as Moira Gatens[11], Elspeth Probyn[12] and Diana Fuss have debated the idea that there is some innate essential quality of femaleness as opposed to the idea that femaleness and femininity are socially constructed and the result of complex ideological and cultural practices, which are open to change.[13] Diana Fuss, in her exploration of the essentialism/constructionism debate, argues that often elements of one are to be found within the other and that 'constructionism [...] really operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism'. Her point is that what we should consider is not whether a text is essentialist or not 'but rather "if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment*?" How does the sign "essence" circulate in various contemporary debates? Where, how and why is it invoked? What are its political and textual effects?'[14]. What is the effect of an apparently essentialist approach and what are the reasons for it? Why is it that two opposed ideologies, patriarchy and feminism, characterise textile in seemingly similar essentialist ways?

Griselda Pollock, a British lecturer and writer in feminist historical, theoretical and critical visual arts studies, believes that, within the twentieth century, 'women artists have

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[9] L. Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin, Routledge, New York, 1993.

[10] H. Cixous, *Sorties*, in Marks and de Courtivron (eds), *New French Feminisms*, cited in A. Cranny Francis, *The Body in the Text*, Melbourne University Press, 1995, p.5.

[11] M. Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London, 1996.

[12] E. Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (Routledge) 1993.

[13] J. Butler, preface, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990. p.viii:

> Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?

[14] D. Fuss, introduction, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*, Routledge, New York, 1989.

been systematically effaced from the history of art'[15]. Her argument is that art history, or the academic discipline which studies the history of art, is an ideological practice because its proponents carry with them the prejudices and psychological colouring of their society. If the ideology is patriarchal the methodology is tainted. Women's art is stereotyped and categorised as having to do with 'femininity' – a concept which has been so internalised that it seems within the natural order of things:

> Although the 'feminine' stereotype seems merely to be a way of excluding women from cultural history, it is in fact a crucial element in the construction of the current view of the history of art. Women's place in art history, we argue, has been misrecognised; exposing the feminine stereotype allows us to realise the true significance of women in art history as a structuring category in its ideology.[16]

In a theoretical stance that echoes de Beauvoir, Pollock believes that the feminine stereotype within art history has been constructed in order to assert the male standard as the benchmark, since it is only against an alternative that something can be evaluated. By extension, then, textile becomes a foil, a medium naturally and essentially associated with domesticity and femininity, characterised as derivative and unoriginal rather than creative. This acts in opposition to a characterisation of painting and sculpture as an essentially male form of individual creativity. It allows for work in these mediums to be viewed as intellectual, challenging and of civic importance. The motivation for the deployment of such an approach is to maintain male superiority within the cultural life of the community in social and political ways – in other words, to establish a patriarchal structure. The naturalness of the association between femininity and domesticity conceals the power structure at work within. It is the operation of this patriarchal power structure that has been the concern of feminist activism.

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[15] R. Parker & G. Pollock, preface, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Pandora Press (Harper Collins), London, 1981, p.xvii
[16] ibid., preface, p.xviii

It is certainly true, however, that the textile medium is one with which many women do identify strongly.[17] Some feminists, therefore, have been determined to utilise this identification in a positive way as part of their attack on the public/private dichotomy and its influence within a patriarchal system. They have used elements of domestic life, including textile, in visually arresting ways both as a political step in publicising and legitimating the experience of the individual woman and as part of a public acceptance of elements of their own private experiences. Thus Australian painter, Elizabeth Gower moved away in the mid-70s from painting on canvas towards the utilisation of paper, plastic and nylon in multi-layered works, often incorporating sewing.

> Although initially irritated when these works were described as 'paper quilts', Gower later embraced references to quiltmaking, to sewing and weaving, as positive influences in her art:'...these elements became incorporated more obviously in my work as my consciousness and growing identity as a woman developed. They became not only a process and means of construction, but a major part of the content.'[18]

Since women, particularly since Victorian times, have been characterised by society as being 'home bodies', feminists have used or referenced textile in ways that have tended to concentrate on those used in the home. The domestic site in Australian culture has been described as 'the only one where women have an acknowledged place or function'[19]. Feminist artists such as Lorraine Hepburn could therefore effectively use the textile associated with it as a rallying point, a point of identification for the majority of women, in order to comment in a biting and often satirical way on the social, economic and cultural position of women[20]. Hepburn presented an exhibition, the *Quilt and Street Show*

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[17] See Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 8, no. 99: 'Attracted to cloth, dressing up etc. since very little – associate it with grandma and mum – colours very rich – *tactile*. Wrapping – protective.' This is a fairly typical response.

[18] S. Kirby, *Sightlines. Women's Art and Feminist Perspectives in Australia*, Craftsman House, East Roseville, NSW, 1992, p.88.

[19] A. Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, Victoria, 1975, p.90. This was one of the first texts to analyse Australian culture in feminist terms.

[20] J. Ewington, 'A thing of threads and patches', in *Simile: Representation in Contemporary Fibre and Textile*, exhibition catalogue, Craft Victoria, 1993, p.13. Ewington writes:

> ...in the 1980s, textiles are now beginning to be considered as a viable artistic medium. A specific possibility is that textiles may evoke deliberate and assertive relationships between femininity and art practice. One example: the connotations of protection, comfort and cleanliness carried by cloth are asserted as positive social values, particularly associated with the feminine responsibilities of family and social network

at the Adelaide Festival centre in 1982. In the exhibition '[e]nlarged versions of articles from the popular press were hand-printed onto double bed size bed quilts. Topics covered included rape, incest, domestic violence and other related issues'.[21] In this way Hepburn used the domestic textile as an element in the structural foundation of a position from which to highlight the inequities of the distribution of power. Hepburn is an example of those feminist artists who have turned the 'gentle arts'[22] into a subversive tool, pressing into service such items as handkerchiefs, aprons and tea towels, in ways which allowed women a voice and with which the artist could emphasise the vulnerability, the unfairness and the assumed inferiority of a woman's social position. This was also part of a strategy to develop alternative criteria for the appreciation of social, economic and cultural productivity by moving textile and the women who make it, from the private into the public space. By this means the artists aimed to upset the dominant male canon within which the cultural contributions of women were negatively assessed against those of men.

Regarding textile as being inextricably associated with the role and position of women dovetails neatly with the essentialist notion or feminist political theory of difference that there must be a specific position to defend or uphold. In an article which in part discusses the threat that postmodernism, with its claims of relativity, multiplicity and indeterminacy, holds for feminism, American theorist Jane Flax explains that: 'Without a unitary subject with a secure, empirical sense of history and gender, no feminist consciousness and hence no feminist politics is possible'[23]. Feminism is a political move towards establishing an identity for women that is not reliant upon men – 'a pure or

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maintenance. This is why Marie Cook's gloriously irreverent tapestries are so pungent. The substance of the image, the beautifully dutiful medium of tapestry, is in direct contradiction to the savagely satirical images Cook proposes. The textile medium works in conjunction with the images to ironically endorse them.

[21] N. Anderson, 'Political issues in Australian Craft', in *Craft Australia*, Summer 1985, vol.4, p.102.

[22] J. Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts*, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, 1987, pp. 6–7. In her preface Isaacs describes her book as:

> ...a celebration of the art of "making". It celebrates women's domestic arts made for the family in the home whether they be d'oyleys, tablecloths, bedspreads, jellies, jams or birthday cakes [..] In presenting this pictorial survey of women's domestic and decorative arts over the last 200 years I hope that they might be raised from 'the scullion wenches' that they were, to take their place as important and valuable components of the social and creative history of Australia.

This is an approach in line with Pollock's determination to reappraise what women have actually been involved in doing. It is subversion of a slightly different kind.

[23] J. Flax, 'The end of innocence', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds J Butler & J. Scott, Routledge, New York, 1992, p.446.

original femininity [...] untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order'[24]. So there had to be an essential womanhood, a way of being female, which could be counterpoised to the patriarchal order. Lucy Lippard, for instance, claimed to see recurrent elements in work by women artists, which she argues, testifies to the existence of a kind of collective feminine consciousness.[25] Although Lippard warned against exclusive equations of such elements with a female sensitivity and her warnings have been heeded at least by some,[26] an overtly political feminist position could often countenance little divergence or disagreement whilst in the pursuit of a unity of womanhood – a unity which might deliver some positive advances towards a position of equality for women in political and social situations as well as within an art historical perspective.

In this sense some artists even in contemporary times have found it useful to continue the essentialisation of textile as being particularly associated with women and the home. Artists such as Pilar Rojas[27] and Philomena Hali[28] utilise their memories of materials or techniques learned from mothers and grandmothers in their expressive journeys. Whether

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[24] D. Fuss, op. cit., p.2.

[25] L. Lippard, *From the Center*, Dutton, New York, 1976, pp.143–144. Lippard writes:

> ...I am convinced that there are aspects of art by women which are inaccessible to men and that these aspects arise from the fact that a woman's political, biological, and social experience in this society is different from that of a man [...] certain elements – a central focus (often 'empty', often circular or oval), parabolic baglike forms, obsessive line and detail, veiled strata, tactile or sensuous surfaces and forms, associative fragmentation, autobiographical emphasis, and so forth – are found far *more often* in the work of women than of men.

[26] S. Kirby, op. cit., p.79. Kirby writes of Lippard that:

> ...although she warned against equating such lists as the one just cited, exclusively with a female sensibility, her warnings were not always heeded – with some unfortunate consequences. As Barbara Hall noted at the Women and Arts Festival, there had been too much time spent 'looking for the feminine *in the work* as if it were an absolute.

[27] Pilar Rojas in *Many Voices. 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998, p.35.

> ...In the sequence other memories crocheted cotton is used to make delicate, hollow forms that resemble skins or sheaths. They evoke personal domestic images and offer many possible avenues for interpretation, empty bottles, children's toys, seeds and fruits, beads, shells and bones etc...Although informed by the constructed history of femininity and the associated meanings of crocheted cotton, these objects are personal abstractions from the home of my childhodd and its women.

[28] Philomena Hali in *Many Voices. 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998, p10.

> ...In the summer my mother and the neighbouring Portugese women would teach me embroidery, crochet, traditional cooking and other 'women's business'...My mother's life as a migrant woman influences my work and I think about her loneliness, her loss of family and culture and her courage in making a home for us in such a different culture.

consciously or not, by utilising these private domestic memories, they challenge the dominant male art canon of painting and sculpture, they identify alternative artistic methods and social milieu and they claim an expressive and powerful voice for women, including themselves, in the public arena.

The Re-visioning of Art Practice and Theory

The art world forms part of the public arena and feminist philosophy has had a considerable influence on contemporary art in two interrelated ways. First, it has challenged the very foundations of art theoretical discourse through innovative and provocative thinking about the gendered construction of the social, cultural and political practices, of which art theory forms a part. Griselda Pollock's argument regarding the ideological nature of historical methodology, noted earlier in this chapter, forms part of a general reappraisal of the academic study of art history which may take as its starting point a 1971 article by Linda Nochlin titled 'Why have there been no great women artists?' In this article Nochlin attacks the presuppositions of an art historical scholarship within which men had devised the criteria for greatness. She argues that trying to insert women artists into the existing art historical catalogue was merely reinforcing its negative implications, and calls for a reappraisal of the discipline of art history:

> What is important is that women face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity. Disadvantage may indeed be an excuse; it is not, however, an intellectual position. Rather, using as a vantage point their situation as underdogs in the realm of grandeur, and outsiders in that of ideology, women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses in general, and, at the same time that they destroy false consciousness, take part in the creation of institutions in which clear thought – and true greatness – are challenges open to anyone, man or woman, courageous enough to take the necessary risk, the leap into the unknown. [29]

[29] L. Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?', in *Sexist Society. Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds V. Gornick & B. Moran, New York, 1971, pp.480–510.

Feminist art historians heeded the call, among them Rozsika Parker, whose text *The Subversive Stitch*[30] explores the history of embroidery in England, using a wide range of historical visual imagery as resource material. In developing her thesis that '[e]mbroidery has become indelibly associated with stereotypes of femininity', she traces the historical development of embroidery as a pursuit through the centuries, both in practical terms and also in light of attitudes towards it. She traces the emergence of a narrowly prescriptive attitude to embroidery to the time of the Renaissance 'when embroidery was increasingly becoming the province of women amateurs, working for the home without pay'. From the eighteenth century embroidery was 'repeatedly used to signify femininity' and 'a leisured, aristocratic lifestyle – not working was becoming the hallmark of femininity. Embroidery with its royal and noble associations was perfect proof of gentility, providing concrete evidence that a man was able to support a leisured woman'. Thus it enabled men to signify their position in the world and helped to underwrite their identity in relation to that of women: 'Finally in the nineteenth century, embroidery and femininity were entirely fused, and the connection was deemed to be natural. Women embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered.' Ultimately, then, argues Parker, the characterisation of needlework has been part of a political enterprise in terms of its association with an ideal femininity. This femininity was based upon 'docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work – it showed the embroiderer to be a deserving, worthy wife and mother' whose proper and natural place was the private domain of domesticity. In this way the existing relationships between men and women could be justified and women would continue to be denied any real political power. Parker's book reflected the developing feminist ideology of the 1970s and was influential at the time in re-evaluating the role and importance of textile and its techniques as an art form. Although Parker was specifically concerned with embroidery, her arguments were of interest to many working within the textile arts and

[30] R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, The Women's Press, London, 1984. All quotes in this paragraph are taken from the first chapter, 'The Creation of Femininity'. In her foreword Parker writes:

> By mapping the relationship between the history of embroidery and changing notions of what constituted feminine behaviour from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, we can see how the art became implicated in the creation of femininity across classes, and that the development of ideals of feminine behaviour determined the style and iconography of needlework. To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.

related theory, being seen to deal with the discipline in a serious and intellectually sustaining manner.

Theoretical scholarship such as Parker's has instigated a re-evaluation of the term 'culture'. Pollock argues that the idea of 'culture as Culture – truth and beauty, the best ideas and values of civilisation' which over generations has been the privileged domain of a patriarchal superstructure, is challenged. Feminist philosophy suggests that it be replaced by a notion of culture that is 'ordinary, a "way of life", a "way of struggle", the territory of social meanings and identities'[31]. Pollock herself, for instance, has been determined to recognise and publicise women's different approach to art practice and to celebrate that difference. Her aim is to avoid a view of the history of women's art as a struggle against male domination because she feels that this merely asserts the male standard as the norm[32]: 'Such an approach fails to convey the specific ways that women have made art under different constraints at different periods, affected as much by factors of class as by their sex.'[33]

As a consequence of such theory, feminist art practice in the USA and Australia has worked to extend the parameters of the art world to incorporate what had previously been excluded – traditional women's practices, which include a longstanding and widespread use of textile and its associated techniques within the private domestic space.[34] As part of their demands for recognition and inclusion in terms of both the wider social milieu and the art world, feminist theorists and practicing artists argued that these textiles, and the women who make them, contribute significantly to the cultural life of society.

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[31] G. Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings*, Routledge, New York, 1996, pp.4–5.
[32] Historians in other fields of investigation support Pollock in this view. See, for example, G. Lerner, 'New approaches to the study of women in American history', in B. Carroll (ed.), *Liberating Women's History*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1976, p.350. Lerner criticises early feminist writers for 'their belief that the history of women is important only as representing the history of an oppressed group and its struggles against its oppressors'.
[33] R. Parker & G. Pollock, op. cit., preface, p.xix.
[34] For example, Lorraine Hepburn and Vivienne Binns in Australia and Miriam Schapiro in the USA.

Feminist Art Practice

Thus, the feminist movement in Australia, as part of the social and political agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, tended to accept the close association of women and textile and, for political reasons, used textile as a tool in the task of redressing the balance regarding the exclusion of women from the power structures of society. It argued that the domestic and private space should be regarded as every bit as important politically and culturally as the public sphere and it made visible the work and concerns of women.[35] The actions of artists and theorists formed part of a revision of culture to include the ordinary and the everyday. Consequently, an initial emphasis in artistic terms was on craft and handiwork, as well as a developing sensibility to the idea that textile has close associations with the body. This notion of embodiment has become an important issue for women for reasons that will be addressed in later chapters. At this stage it should be noted that the body, and its position with regard to the vexed questions of sex and gender, is seen to be central to notions of identity.[36] Textile has thus formed part of the feminist armoury. For instance, The Women's Art Register was established in 1975 with the aim of documenting Australian women artists and their work.[37] It produced a Women's Art Register poster, which significantly featured a printed lace and fringed edging, a particularly feminine statement. The main body of the poster contained images of painting, printmaking and ceramics against a printed fabric background.[38]

In addition to simply acknowledging the more traditional uses of textile, the feminist movement of the late 1960s onwards eagerly seized upon textile for its perceived subversive power as a direct means of challenging the female condition.[39] Feminists

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[35] S. Kirby, op. cit., p.79.
One of the main strengths of the social and political radicalism of feminism derived from its legitimisation of individual experience [...] women drew on their own lives to celebrate their biological, social and cultural differences. This aspect of the women's movement was particularly important in the early '70s when women began to rearticulate the nature of their oppression and how different their experiences were from men.

[36] J. Butler, op. cit., p.8. Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir whose contention was that 'one is not born a woman but becomes one'. Butler argues that 'If "the body is a situation," as [de Beauvoir] claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings...'.

[37] This register is now housed in Melbourne's Carringbush Library. It numbers some 12, 000 slides and is the most comprehensive visual record of its kind. See J. Burke, *Field of Vision: A Decade of Change: Women's Art in the Seventies,* Viking, 1990, p.2.

[38] This poster is reproduced on the title page of this chapter.

[39] J. Ewington, op. cit., p.13. Ewington writes:

within the art world organised exhibitions and art events which placed emphasis on work produced by women in all art forms but with particular attention to textile, which previously, they argued, had been denied a place of value in the visual art world. *The D'Oyley Show: An Exhibition of Women's Domestic Fancywork*, held in Sydney at the Watters Gallery in 1979, was one example of such an exhibition within Australia. This exhibition was coordinated by members of the Women's Domestic Needlework Group and presented a large collection of d'oyleys based on traditional patterns. The catalogue concerned itself with the history of women's domestic needlework and the industrial production of textile for use within the home. As well as an emphasis on the type of work itself, the exhibition catalogue gave equal consideration to the social and working conditions under which textile was produced by women within factories.[40] As a corollary, it is interesting to note, as an illustration of the contemporary mindset, that 'five major artists who exhibited at Watters chose this moment to leave, the "trivial" nature of the *D'Oyley Show*, its lack of "seriousness" and commercial viability being part of the reason'[41]. The contents of this exhibition were subsequently destroyed in a fire.[42]

Another textile exhibition of the same era was the *Quantum Leaps Quilt Exhibition*, organised in 1982 and held at the Festival Centre Gallery in Adelaide as part of the *Quantum Leaps* women's art show. Nola Anderson describes the exhibition in an article for *Craft Australia*. She writes:

> The show emphasised the viewpoint that women's art had been largely ignored by male-oriented art history. In the catalogue, the exhibition of traditional and contemporary quilts

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Since the 1960s feminist artists have explored every variety of needle work techniques and fibres, as a contribution to the 'work in progress' of understanding the possibilities arising out of the specific social and cultural inheritance of women. The influence of American artists Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago springs immediately to mind, and the work of both has been represented in this country [...] *Feministo*, the postal Art Event from the U.K., seen in Melbourne in 1977, was very influential in changing artists' attitudes towards textiles used in the fine arts and as late as 1987 Chicago's *The Dinner Party* inspired particular admiration at its Melbourne showing for its fine embroidered runners.

[40] Exhibition catalogue, Watters Gallery, Sydney, 1979, reproduced in C. Moore (ed.), *Dissonances: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, pp.57–70.

[41] Micky Allan, artist, quoted in C. Lucas, 'You say you want a revolution', *Art & Australia*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1998, pp.241–242.

[42] John McPhee, personal interview, 1997.

> was intended to create a tribute to women's work and a recognition of that work as a fundamental source of women's art.[43]

Such a show had the desired effect of making women's work visible but, according to Anderson, an interesting side effect was the ensuing discussion:

> ...that went beyond the quality of the work and examined the message presented by the 'fact' of the exhibition itself. Could such a show provide a reassessment of women's work as art or did the quilts simply reinforce an existing stereotype? Were new roles established for this work by placing it in a gallery? To which status of art should these works aspire? Far from being politically intentioned works in their own right, these quilts assumed political significance through the mechanics of an exhibition.[44]

In such ways then, and in spite of concerns expressed in some sectors of the feminist movement, a quintessential domestic style of work was re-positioned for political intent. Exhibitions such as this increasingly emphasised the significance of the domestic private space and lent credence to the feminist insistence that 'the personal is political' which became a slogan of the feminist movement.

It can be seen then that textile, especially that form of textile which is domestic in character, has been important to many women and has formed part of the language available to them.[45] It has always been an important means of expression for some women, whatever their political stance. However, much as Ailsa Maxwell in 1982 took issue with a feminism that identified women as 'other' and spoke of 'women's culture'[46]

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[43] N. Anderson, op. cit. 1985, p.101.

[44] ibid., pp.100-101. See also *Setting the Pace. The Women's Art Movement 1980 – 1983*, The Women's Art Movement, Adelaide, 1984, pp.58–60, in which the article 'Quilts: Sentimental feminism?' by Ailsa Maxwell is reproduced. Maxwell expressed concern at the quilt show being 'publicly presented under the banner of a feminist art organisation'. While admiring the quilts themselves, Maxwell questions their use as icons of a female art form and expresses support for de Beauvoir's stand on femininity as a social construct and deplores a feminism that promulgates

> an aesthetic based on sexuality and an experience of otherness...There was a time too when feminists wrote their graffiti on walls instead of self-consciously stitching it onto twee little quilts. And there was a time when we deplored the existence of sex role stereotypes instead of trafficking in them.

[45] J. Butler, op. cit., p.1. 'For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women.'

[46] A. Maxwell, op. cit.

in a way that she perceived as conniving with patriarchy, I feel that to continue to characterise the textile tradition as predominantly a female preoccupation and to consider textile a feminised medium runs the risks associated with essentialism. It identifies textile as a language and a tradition associated with a certain biologically-based persona which exemplifies inherent and natural qualities. As with any form of essentialist thinking, the result is a limited and stereotyped position. In this case it ignores the wider social and cultural implications of textile within Australian contemporary society.

This is not to deny the strategic importance of early feminist theory to an understanding of the role that textile as a medium plays in the art world. It is, however, to acknowledge that just as feminism has had to confront concerns about its own discourse, so theory about textile needs to reappraise its foundations. Feminism has been criticised as a universalising text, which in its turn is guilty of suppressing the diversity embodied in race, class, age and genetic loading. Judith Butler, for instance, discusses the problems faced by feminists who, in making a play for power, try to formulate a subject who will benefit from political representations made on her behalf: 'Juridical power inevitably "produces" what it claims merely to represent; hence, politics must be concerned with this dual function of power: the juridical and the productive.'[47] She points out that, in constructing the subject – woman - feminism is in danger of indulging in the same kind of exclusionary practices as the patriarchal institutions they deplore. Additionally, feminism opens itself up to characterisation as a 'polemic against patriarchy that ultimately ontologises woman in terms of an essential superiority and a privileged relationship to nature and truth'[48].

As a consequence, it may be more rewarding to embark upon a less essentialist consideration of the textile tradition, a consideration which may extend the possibilities

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To talk of 'women's culture' is to reaffirm woman's 'otherness' and perversely reassert woman's absence from mainstream culture. And yet ironically this is precisely where WAM seeks to make an incursion – into the mainstream – via the front doors of the Festival Centre and the Seymour Centre (Sydney). There can be no subversion when patriarchy has defined the parameters of 'women's culture' and feminists choose to reaffirm women's 'otherness' and remain firmly within those parameters.

[47] J. Butler, op. cit., p..2.

[48] B. Martin, 'Feminism, criticism and Foucault', in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, eds I. Diamond & L. Quinby, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1988, p.15.

for textile as a contemporary medium of representation and expression. There is much to be said for adopting a theoretical position of deconstruction as it relates to the subject of textile as art medium. In so doing, we should be prepared to address the subject of textile in ways that touch upon its wider traditions, its material and symbolic manifestations within the broader sphere. To this end, and aside from its domestic terms of reference, in the following chapters I examine textile's function in the embodiment of positions of power within the public political space and I consider how its role within this space has involved women. I discuss some particularly relevant theories about the nature of power. I consider textile as a form of language. If deconstructive theory revolves around language and if textile is a language, how is it spoken and who has used it?

In the first instance however, because of its impact upon social organisation, the role of men and women and their relative positions in regard to the use of power, I discuss in the next chapter the public/private dichotomy and its implications for the structure and perceptions of society.

Chapter Two

THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Unknown British-Tasmanian artists
***The Rajah Quilt*, 1841**

Source: J. Kerr (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW,1995

Chapter Two

THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

> ...I realized that the particularities of where we speak are as important to the signification as the content of what we are saying. The place where I was speaking hovered between the private and the public; for all its 'homey' feeling, in the final instance it was a classroom in a francophone university, an institution still touched by discursive traditions quite different from my own.[1]
>
> Elspeth Probyn

> Textiles provides a place where private and public meet. Just as clothing is the exterior face of the mind and body, so textiles is the juncture of the privately hand made in the public sphere. What other art form shares such intimacy where the artist handles and caresses every stitch, knows every inch of the fabric? [...] a textile piece can never rid itself of its association with the body, and with warmth. At the end of the day, it can (nearly) always be taken off the wall and worn.[2]
>
> Robyn Daw

The public/private dichotomy, the separation of society into influential public and cloistered private spaces, is far-reaching in its implications but troubled in its analysis. It is used in highly simplistic terms to denote two mutually exclusive spheres, each of an essentialist, long-standing cultural association with a male or a female persona respectively:

> ...an opposition between 'domestic' and 'public' provides the basis of a structural framework necessary to identify and explore the place of male and female in psychological, cultural, social, and economic aspects of human life [...] Though this opposition will be more or less salient in different social and ideological systems, it does provide a universal framework for conceptualizing the activities of the sexes. The opposition does not

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[1] E. Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London, 1993, p.82.
[2] R. Daw, *Tradition Cloth Meaning*, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 1995.

> *determine* cultural stereotypes or asymmetries in the evaluations of the sexes, but rather underlies them, to support a very general (and, for women, often demeaning) identification of women with domestic life and of men with public life.[3]

Sue Rowley, a distinguished Australian art historian with a particular interest in feminism in the visual arts and craft theory and culture, describes the public/private dichotomy as having three levels of meaning. First, it is 'an *historical transformation* in the organisation of social activities' which dated from the sixteenth century. Second, it is an '*ideology* which not only describes a perception of the natural order, but also prescribes patterns of social organisation'. Third, the dichotomy refers to 'a *conceptual framework*, within which we interpret the past – a mode of thinking which structures the ways in which we address both the 'actual' past and the ways in which people inhabiting the past represented their social world'. I would like to examine these levels of meaning in greater detail.

Historical Transformation

The perceived schism between public and private space is a developmental phenomenon, an historical transformation. Jürgen Habermas has argued that 'it is not possible to demonstrate the existence of a public sphere in its own right, separate from the private sphere, in the European society of the High Middle Ages'[4]. During the Middle Ages the lives of both men and women were constructed around work. Although institutions such as the Church controlled the organisation of social life and emphasised the 'natural' inferiority of women through its various doctrines, it appears that the lives of women were not privatised and domesticised to the same extent as in later years. By the thirteenth century it was possible for a woman to inherit up to one third of her parent's land. Along with this came many feudal rights and privileges: the raising of troops, the coining of money and the dispensation of justice. A woman could trade as a merchant and all the laws of the time granted her equal status, regardless of her marital situation. As a

[3] M. Rosaldo & L. Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, California, 1974. An early and influential feminist text compiled by feminist anthropologists, pp. 23–24.

result of Richard the Lionheart's Crusades, women's economic and social status benefited since, with many of the feudal lords away at battle, the role of estate and business manager often fell to their wives. There are a number of documents suggesting that these women were as strong and competent in their work as their husbands would have been.[5] The boundaries between domestic, public and economic life were less strictly defined and 'there is evidence that [women] participated in all forms of cultural production from masonry and building to manuscript illuminating and embroidery'[6].

However things changed during the Renaissance, the period that Rowley identifies as marking the beginning of the public/private dichotomy that led to an increased curtailment of women's participation in the public space. This resulted from a renewed interest and veneration for the culture of Ancient Greece, a culture in which, according to 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt, the division between the public and private was theorised as being natural and unequivocal:

> According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home and the family. The rise of the city state meant that man received besides his private life a sort of second life, his bios politikos.[7]

The division between public and private is ideologically driven because the construction of a private space enabled a concomitant construction of a public male space that allowed the male to secure his identity. The public space or *bios politikos* was a space of male equals:

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[4] J. Habermas, 'The Public Sphere', in *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, eds C. Mukerji & M. Schudaon, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991, p.399.
[5] H. Kraus, 'Eve and Mary: Conflicting images of Medieval woman', in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds N. Broude & M.D. Garrard, Harper & Row, New York, 1982.
[6] W. Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, Thames & Hudson, London, rev. edn, 1996, p.44.
[7] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958 p.24.

> Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed.[8]

Whereas the household, shared by man and wife, was a pre-political space of the strictest inequality, where the woman was deemed to be subservient:

> ...the whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense in which we understand them as well as the regulated order attending them, was felt to be prepolitical and to belong in the private rather than the public sphere.[9]

While Arendt's analysis has been subjected to criticism it does seem that, from the 16th century onward, women in both theoretical and practical terms were systematically confined to the domestic private space. Art and craft, for example, were increasingly defined and separated into an exclusivity whereby art became a public institution and craft a home-based activity. Whereas art had been produced previously by artisans in a workshop environment, usually closely associated with the family home (which then often by necessity included women), the emphasis shifted towards art education in academies and towards art and craft production through the mechanism of guilds, which came to be male-dominated. Women under these circumstances increasingly lost access to conventional forms of training and were gradually excluded from workshops and guilds. They then had to take advantage of other conditions so that, after this time, women who worked as artists either came from painting families or increasingly from aristocratic backgrounds. Unless they had these opportunities, their production was limited to the private space and consequently labelled as craft.

Ideology

Rowley's second characterisation of the public/private schism is as an '*ideology* which not only describes a perception of the natural order, but also prescribes patterns of social organisation'. Hannah Arendt's anti-modernist account of the Greek political space has

[8] ibid., pp.32–33.
[9] ibid., p.32.

been criticised for its eulogistic nature and its uncompromising public/private distinction. Nonetheless other 20th writers and feminists have found Arendt and her position useful:

> ...as a theorist of a politics that is potentially activist, certainly dynamic, an agonal and performative politics that ...can serve as a promising model for a feminist politics that seeks to contest...the prevailing construction of sex and gender into binary and binding categories of identity, as well as the prevailing binary division of political space into a public and private realm. [10].

Feminist theory, for instance, has been critical of the idea of the private sphere as pre-political in the Greek sense and therefore subject to strict governance and regulation, and has emphasised its ideological nature. Sherry Ortner suggested that the link of women to a domestic space where child rearing was their main pursuit identified them with 'nature' whilst men in the public space of higher thought were identified with created 'culture'[11]. Such an analysis combined with discussion about the separation of the public and private spheres allowed for a reinspection of the past[12]. If the social construction of a public/private dichotomy can be demonstrated as an ideological division, it is susceptible and may be reversed. The feminist movement identified the family household as a patriarchal and, quite definitely, a *political* institution. It assumes its position alongside those other institutions such as school, church and state, which facilitate and prescribe the functioning of a society. Like these other institutions, the family is ideologically driven and constructions of gender play their role 'in concealing the permeability of the boundaries'[13] that supposedly separate private from public space.

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[10] B. Honig, 'Towards an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity', in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, Butler, J. & Scott, J.W., (eds), Routledge, New York, 1992. Also Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self. Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, Polity Press, U.K. 1992, pp.90-91.

[11] Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' in *Woman, Culture and Society*, Rosaldo, M. & Lamphere, L., Stanford University Press, California, 1974.

[12] D. O. Helly & S. Reverby, (eds.) Gendered Domains. Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History, Cornell University Press, New York, 1992., Introduction.

[13] D. Helly & S. Reverby, *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992, p.9.

Conceptual Framework

Rowley's third description of the public/private dichotomy is as a '*conceptual framework*, within which we interpret the past – a mode of thinking which structures the ways in which we address both the 'actual' past and the ways in which people inhabiting the past represented their social world'. A conceptual framework may be deeply ingrained and often unrecognised and Rowley warns of the dangers in perpetuating these ideological frameworks in the process of writing history and through a general acceptance of people's social stories:

> ...it is necessary to be aware that in writing histories of public, private, domestic and personal lives, we frequently depend on representations made by people who both relied on a distinction between public – masculine and private – feminine domains and retained, perhaps ambivalently, an ideological commitment to these 'separate spheres'. [14]

Anne Summers is an Australian feminist and writer who, in 1975 theorised the role of women in Australian society and highlights the conceptual framework of the colonial period.[15] Her book, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, puts feminist theory into a specifically Australian context. Her thesis is that, in Australian society, to an extent greater than in British society, for instance, a woman's position has been defined with particular regard to the institution of the family. As a result women were consigned 'to

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[14] S. Rowley, 'Going public, getting personal', in *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts*, ed. C. Moore, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, p. 214.

[15] A. Summers, op. cit., pp. 294–295. In her study Summers traces the development of Australia from a penal colony towards nationhood from a female perspective and quotes a number of historical theories on general social development. In particular she discusses the fragment theory of Louis Hartz who proposed that:

> ...[a] new society be viewed as a fragment of the parent nation, the fragment encapsulating the dominant political and social ideologies prevalent at the time of the founding of the new society...What is important about the fragment is that although it imports the dominant ideology, this is not accompanied by either the forces which gave rise to it or those which subsequently arose to counter it; the history of the parent nation and the new society thus will differ...

While expressing some reservations, Summers adapts the thinking and argues that it can be used to explain why the family unit became such a strong basic social unit in Australian life:

> Australia, it can be argued, became the fragment within which the bourgeois ideal of 'the family' was able to flourish, and to be adopted by all classes long before it would have been possible for them had they remained in Britain. Australia became the place where, from the late 1840s onwards, thousands of immigrants were able to turn their aspirations of emulating middle-class lifestyles into some kind of reality [...] the idea that the bourgeois family was the ideal way for men and women to live and reproduce was shared by ruling class and immigrants alike. It was one of the bases on which immigration agents in England sought to select prospective settlers: married couples and young people of marriageable age were given priority for assisted passages. And it was an idea that did not require a lengthy process of induction or preparation.

only two possible destinies... [T]he pro-family stereotype is called "God's Police" while its antithesis is 'Damned Whore'[16]. As a result of Australia's convict history and the place of women within it, the stereotypes were given a 'distinctive cast. Although they include women's relations with men, they are more widely defined than that and involve a broader social function than is often permitted to women in other countries'[17].

> The God's Police stereotype describes and *prescribes* a set of functions which all Australian women are supposed to fulfil: the maintenance and reproduction of the basic authority relations of society. The prototype of these is found within 'the family' and it is here that women ideally perform their task, but the task of shoring up these authority relations requires extensive support systems, among them the education and social welfare network. The God's Police stereotype permits women to work in these areas, so long as they perform the prescribed functions and do not contradict any other fundamental tenets of the stereotype.[18]

This broader social function afforded some Australian women a particularly influential role in the development of community and political life as moral educators and virtuous role models. However Summers contends that this female influence on Australian community and society has gone largely unreported, so complete has been historical analysis in terms of the achievements of the public and visible male.[19] Summers cites the philosophy of Caroline Chisholm, an influential nineteenth century reformer who undertook pioneering work with female immigrants[20]. She firmly believed that women

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[16] A. Summers, op. cit., pp.150–151.

[17] ibid., p.152.

[18] A. Summers, op. cit., p.152.

[19] A. Summers, op. cit., p.293:

> But to attribute the changes which occurred in the socio-economic and authority structures solely or even mainly, to the labouring or political activities of men and the moral exhortations of ministers of religion ignores huge tracts of human intention and experience. It entails totally excluding from consideration one group who by now comprised nearly 25 per cent of the population. In these accounts, women assume an ethereal existence and are apparently subsumed within the activities of men.

[20] ibid, pp.300–301.

> [Chisholm] went round the streets and parks of Sydney, gathering up distressed women and took them into her home, but she soon recognised that large scale measures were necessary to alleviate the plight of what she estimated to be six hundred women [...] She began by pressuring Governor Gipps who grudgingly gave her the use of a building where, on 26 October 1841, she opened a Female Immigrants Home.
>
> Chisholm's aim was to find employment, not merely find shelter for the women, and she established the first free labour registry in Sydney [...] At the end of her first year of work Caroline Chisholm claimed that she had been 'the instrument either directly or indirectly of serving upwards of 2000 persons'; 1,400 of these were women, including 76 whom she said were 'reclaimed' prostitutes.

could play a significant part in the structuring of the new colonial society as moral educators and virtuous role models. In fact Chisholm went so far as to say that, without the presence and influence of 'good and virtuous women', the God's Police of society, churches and schools would be largely ineffective.[21] While the Church and its ministers have been documented as having effect as moral policemen[22], Chisholm 'saw women as actively complementing, if not taking over, the policing role played by chaplains during the penal era. Wives, she considered, could have a much greater and more direct influence on their husbands than any once-a-week contact with religion could ensure.'[23] Even for Chisholm, however, the influence of the female role remained well within the realms of marriage and motherhood and the bourgeois ideal of the family unit. Summers also argues that even male pursuits and interests were historicised in so selective a manner that a man's relationship with home and family, and its influence on him, was largely ignored:

> But even the accounts of the men are inadequate. What were these men working for? How did they actually see their changed environment and status? How did a few ministers succeed in taming what most commentators concurred was an ubiquitously amoral and rebellious populace? The historians of labour and religion have myopically concentrated overmuch on the public lives of men and have not made the obvious connections between these and family developments in colonial Australia. Such a recognition would have enabled them to perceive some of the motives influencing these men and to recognize the new functions and status women were starting to assume.[24]

Thus Summers highlights the dual pitfalls of the conceptual framework: 1) its ideological impact on colonial history and 2) the failure of historians to recognise or acknowledge this impact.

Chisholm wanted the employment she found for the women to be temporary. What she wanted was for them to become wives and mothers and she went to great lengths to encourage marriage between single women and respectable settlers.

[21] ibid., p.291.
[22] ibid., p.293.
[23] ibid., pp.301–302.
[24] ibid., p.294.

The Writing of History: A Late 20th Century Approach

Rowley and Summers have recognised that historians and cultural analysts must be aware of the pervasive influence of ideologies and their effects on supposedly objective research. It is also increasingly acknowledged by contemporary historians such as Grace Karskens[25] that, in order to understand the structure of a society and its historical traditions, it is necessary to rely on the experiences of more than a few isolated, albeit socially significant, individuals. Historian, Portia Robinson, in her 1985 study of the first Australian or native-born generation, *The Hatch and Brood of Time*, argues that history has characterised the nature of this generation on the basis of assumption and distorted preconceived opinion:

> Yet, until now, no one has known who these boys and girls actually were [...] Most importantly, both contemporary opinions and later historical interpretations and explanations have been based on British views, not from the standpoint of the *colonial* experience.[26]

She argues that in neglecting a clearer insight into the broader structure of this generation we are missing the opportunity to account for the origins of 'those distinctive characteristics which were to become recurring and typical, to shape the ethos, tradition, mystique, of a future nation'[27].

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[25] G. Karskens, introduction, *The Rocks. Life in Early Sydney*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria, 1997, p.6. Karskens writes:

> It is curious that historians of Sydney have not investigated the Rocks, an area embedded so deeply in the city's psyche. Perhaps it is so 'well known', its reputation so widely accepted, that no one bothered to look more closely. The reliance on the 'Rocks' stereotype, usually a brief reference in a larger narrative, is typical of most books dealing with early Sydney. In most cases such studies are pitched at a level too broad to deal with individuals and communities, and so tend to fall back on convenient stereotypes. They are not intended as sociocultural studies, and hence rarely question 'givens' such as class and gender, let alone culture. This becomes a problem when our own assumptions about, say, social structure or gender roles, or notions such as 'respectability', are applied to a past which might have operated according to entirely different structures, expectations and roles.

[26] P. Robinson, *The Hatch and Brood of Time*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, p.6.

[27] ibid., p.7:

> Most of their (the officials) observations were limited to certain aspects of colonial life and that they were influenced by preconceived expectations and assumptions as to the characteristics of a convict society. Official reports, private letters and published journals reflect a preoccupation with criminality and immorality, with the drunken, and depraved behaviour of convicted felons. There was little occasion to comment on the life-styles of those men and women which did not conform to the expectations of vice and infamy in the convict colony of Botany Bay.

Robinson's book and a 1997 text, *The Rocks. Life in Early Sydney*, by Grace Karskens, are examples of contemporary studies based upon documents, notebooks, maps and pictures relating to the lives of ordinary early white Australians. Karskens' study of everyday community life in the early colonial period up to about 1830[28] reveals that the Rocks family often occupied a very public forum and her research seems to indicate a fluidity in relationships, which belies the stability of the married state as envisaged by Caroline Chisholm. In fact Karskens argues that colonial society mirrored an earlier period of British history, an urban preindustrial time before the increasing intervention of church and state.[29] Ordinary inhabitants of the Rocks considered common law marriages to be quite normal and indeed as having legal advantages. Karskens suggests that a monogamous union sanctified by the church was a state more admired by the higher classes, who were concerned with the development of a bourgeois and respectable society, if for no other reason than to belie the view of Australia as a lawless and depraved place[30]:

> Governor Macquarie probably did more than his predecessors in educating the lower orders towards the idea of official marriage, yet the effect was by no means universal. The *Sydney Gazette* carried his decree more or less commanding the majority of people who were cohabiting to marry. Some did but many took no notice. It is clear that many of the Rocks

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[28] G. Karskens, op. cit., introduction, p.7:
It is also often assumed that we cannot really know much about the mass of ordinary people, because they were obscure and did not leave many records. But convicts and ex-convicts, the ordinary people who made the Rocks and Sydney, did leave a great wealth of records of astounding detail and clarity. Their voices are heard in petitions and letters, court records and coroners' inquests, to name a few. It is possible to trace their movements, to reconstruct their households and families, and to examine their material lives. The sources, including documents, maps, pictures and material evidence, provide the bare facts of time and place and so on, but they are also holograms of their times. They contain or suggest the myriad 'vivid glimpses...of people *doing things*', actions and gestures, whether small or informal, or ritualised and public . Rocks people begin to emerge as human beings: their struggles and feuds, personal relationships, love, loyalty and loathing are all in evidence, and are usually inextricably bound to the place where they live.

[29] ibid., p.80:
The struggles of the church and then the state to control, standardize and legalize marriage has a long history. In the eleventh century and earlier, both marriage and divorce were completely private affairs, but from the thirteenth through to the eighteenth centuries the church was active in the long campaign against common law marriage, particularly among the poor, and promoting the idea of marriage as an indissoluble union involving a monogamous relationship.

[30] ibid., introduction, p.8:
Socially [Sydney] was divided not according to the three classes so familiar to us (upper or ruling, middle, and working) but according to rank. Society was understood as comprising two great orders, the higher and the lower, with no separate middle class as we know it. The artisans, small shopkeepers and a few clerks were 'middling' people, part of the lower orders [.] many minutely-divided ranks within the orders were constantly slipping and shifting over one another, and appear from our own perspective to be disorderly.

> people, young and old, newly arrived and long time residents, with children or without, were not officially married, and did not consider marriage essential.[31]

As an illustration Karsken tells the story of Judith Simpson, a publican and a house and landowner living in the Rocks in the late 1810s who had three children by three different men, two of them military officers. For her 'the children of her three partners, each named proudly for his father, were not badges of shame or degradation, but the opposite: evidence of her connections with rank and status, which together with her own talents and skills had left her well-off, propertied and respected'[32]. Consequently, it seems fair to say that while the inhabitants of colonial Australia's varied social strata may have held differing views of family structure, family relationships, whether sanctified or not, were significant in the development of community life. Karskens has painstakingly explored available records to reveal that within the Rocks area, an area stereotyped as a hotbed of depravity and immorality, almost half the total number of households '...were full of babies, toddlers and older children, who lived mainly in family groups, usually with a mother and father'[33].

Like Summers Karskens identifies the conceptual framework that has produced the stereotypes of historical record. Through her approach and by her painstaking examination of documentary evidence about the lives of ordinary people Karskens has endeavoured to tell alternative stories, to make visible the invisible, and by this means to provide a more extended and ultimately more faithful description of a particular period of time. My journey through this chapter has taken us down a sociological and historical path. It is time to return to the textile and its role as artefact within this journey. While Karskens' text has been one method of giving visibility to an historically obscured group there have been other methods. I would like to examine here three particular examples of textile artefacts, two of which overtly represent women of the Australian colonial era, and one which is significant in relation to Summers' historical account.

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[31] ibid., p.82.
[32] ibid., p.77.
[33] ibid., p.35.

Summers described the importance of the family unit to the development of a stable Australian society. Settlers within Australia, concerned for the public perception of the colony as a criminal and lawless place argued for an end to the system of convict transportation.[34] This argument became the platform of the Australasian Anti-Transportation League, a merger of various State associations which was formed in Melbourne in 1851 largely as a result of the efforts of the Reverend John West, a clergyman from Launceston, Tasmania and editor of Launceston's *Examiner* newspaper. The League developed a flag, the most important of Australia's early flags. It was based on a design by West *but was sewn and embroidered by local Tasmanian women.* In 1853, after Britain declared an end to transportation to the eastern colonies, the League was disbanded and the flag no longer flown. The flag is preserved in the collection of the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston, Tasmania. On a background of blue, it shows the Union Jack on the hoist, and the five stars of the Southern Cross on the fly. It bears a great similarity to the modern Australian flag and it was made by women.

The next textile is a patchwork quilt. Caroline Chisholm's pioneering work with female immigrants is mirrored by the actions in Britain of Elizabeth Fry, a Quaker who organised the British Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners. These ladies visited female prisoners in Newgate Jail in London and, when they were transported, provided them with 'two pounds of patches, threads, pins and needles so they could spend their time sewing on board ship on route to Australia.'[35] The aim was to provide work for idle hands, which, it was thought, would have the effect of improving moral standards. If the women produced patchwork quilts along the way they would have something to sell on their arrival and this would provide funds to help in their settlement. Few such quilts have survived but one, a medallion style quilt known as 'The Rajah Quilt', is in the National Gallery of Australia. It was made by a number of quilters, possibly both free travellers and convict women, aboard the ship Rajah, which sailed from England to Van Diemen's Land in 1841. This brightly coloured, predominantly

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[34] F. Cayley, , *Beneath the Southern Cross: The Story of Australia through Flags*, Reed Books, 1980, pp.49–52.
[35] J. Kerr (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, Craftsman House, Roseville East, NSW, 1995, pp.90–91. See also M. Rolfe, *Australian Quilt Heritage*, Fairfax Press Pty ltd, 1998, pp. 20-22.

yellow quilt, is made of many fabric pieces, cut and arranged in rows around a central appliquéd panel of birds and flowers. The rows are made up of traditionally cut and pieced diamond and triangle shapes. The outer border has three sides appliquéd with pieced star shapes while the fourth edge is decorated with appliquéd floral motifs similar to the central panel. One of these motifs bears an interesting embroidered inscription:

TO THE LADIES
of the Convict ship Committee
This quilt worked by the Convicts
of the ship Rajah during their voyage
to Van Diemens Land is presented as a
testimony of the gratitude with which
they remember their exertions for their
welfare while in England and during
their passage and also as a proof that
they have not neglected the Ladies
kind admonitions of being industrious.
June 1841

We are told that Jane Franklin, wife of the Governor of Tasmania, wrote to Elizabeth Fry after the arrival of the Rajah in Hobart. She had obviously learned of Fry's work and set herself to follow suit in Tasmania by establishing the Tasmanian Ladies' Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners. The Rajah Quilt and its inscription illustrate the involvement and influence of women in the organisation of the communities of the time. Its subsequent acquisition by the nation's major art gallery sends a message in relation to its status and ensures its visibility in current art historical terms as well as the visibility of the group of women (albeit in the most part anonymous) associated with it in social historical terms.

The final example of a textile artefact relating to this era of Australian history is more overtly related to contemporary art. In 1995 *Secure the Shadow*, an exhibition by Australian artists Anne Brennan and Anne Ferran was installed at the Hyde Park Barracks, an institution that 'figures dramatically in public perception as a museum of convict and proto-nationalist settler conflict'.[36] Anne Brennan records her experiences in

[36] J. Kerr & J. Holder (eds.), *Past Present. The National Women's Art Anthology*, Craftsman House, 1999, Sydney, p155

the development of the exhibition in a subsequent essay.[37] The Barracks had been a Government Asylum between 1848 and 1886 for emigrant, indigent and infirm women. The artists were given access to the Barracks' archaeological collection which mainly consisted of bags and boxes of dust and ragged textile fragments, sometimes containing traces of 'a sprigged pattern, the neatly stitched gathers of a bodice, or the sleeve of a gown', which were 'retrieved from beneath the floorboards, and from rats' nests during the course of the refurbishment of the building between 1980 and 1984.' In attempting to make something intelligible out of this material the artists tried to gather information from other sources: 'I looked insistently for a coherent narrative. I clung to the possibility of retrieving lost stories.' But in the end Brennan and Ferran could find little with which to reconstitute the lives of these forgotten women.

> We began to think of our engagement with the women in a way which would allow us to acknowledge *their* lives, *their* experiences whilst, at the same time, admitting that the women's stories are gone now, and that what exists is our stories about them. It was only at this point that we were able to realise that the very incoherence of the Barracks' textile collection *was* its eloquence. It is as though these inchoate clots of matter constitute, literally, the ground-down experience of the women.[38]

The final installation consisted of mounds of this textile enclosed in glass cases and complemented by hand-stitched books (Brennan) that reflected the scraps of stitched material included amongst the rags and photographs of dark faceless heads (Ferran) wearing the cloth mob-style soft caps of the colonial period.

The positioning of these textile artefacts in a contemporary world questions the basis of the public/ private dichotomy. The housing of a quilt in one of the nation's major cultural institutions and the installation of bundles of rag material in glass cases as part of a strategic exhibition raise issues about the ideology and conceptual frameworks in which these artefacts and their makers were originally conceptualised. These examples of textile as both art and artefact illustrate the power of textile as a form of language and as a

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[37] Anne Brennan, 'Thinking About Process' in *Craft & Contemporary Theory*, ed. S. Rowley, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1997, pp.93-97.
[38] ibid, p.94.

medium of expression in a modern era in which, amongst other issues, the construction of history and the identification of those who make it, is a source of debate. The earlier invisibility of certain sectors of society or their visibility within prescribed conceptual frameworks is being questioned. Much of the questioning results from feminist-inspired debate and philosophy. One of feminism's objectives has been to raise the visibility of disempowered sectors of society, often but not always, women.

I agree with Anne Summers' view that women have been more influential than is commonly recognised in the construction and subsequent development of Australian society and culture. Conjointly, I will argue that forms of textile, a visual language and means of expression often claimed particularly by women, have been used within Australian communities in ways that include that of women fulfilling their role as 'God's Police', albeit without recognition. It is my intention therefore to explore the use of textile by Australian women in community roles, which include domestic roles but are not strictly confined to them. First however, I will examine more specifically the authority and capacity of textile as a medium to make the invisible visible and as a means to embody positions of power.

Chapter Three

THE NATURE OF POWER

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Jan Irvine
***All Australian*, 1994**
Airbrushed dyed silk, wool-filled, hand stitched quilt

Source: *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Textile Art*, University of Wollongong, exhibition catalogue, 1995

Chapter Three

THE NATURE OF POWER

The nature of power is complicated by the nature of one's position relative to it. The early feminist movement revolved around issues of power and the associated inequality of women. As we have seen power has been associated with a particular (public) space from which women were, particularly from the age of the Renaissance, excluded as a result of ideological process and a conceptual framework which was seen as natural and logical. Further to this and again on the basis of their sexed identity, women, in both theoretical and practical terms, were systematically confined to what is designated the private, domestic space. I have discussed the theories of Rowley and Summers who believe that this confinement has resulted in a comparative invisibility in historical terms. Feminist theory has therefore developed a contemporary concern for and consideration of identity with particular reference to gender whilst also tacking the issue of invisibility. The issues of power, identity and spatial organisation/characterisation are closely entwined.

Egalitarian feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Germaine Greer[1] have equated the public space with a type of patriarchal power that is exercised in a negative way with regard to women. For them power signifies a form of relationship between men and women which is unequal and repressive. Early equality-orientated feminist strategies were designed to install women into the public space and to make them visible by writing them into the existing male-dominated historical canon. For instance, an influential art exhibition in the USA, *Women Artists: 1550- 1950* organised in 1976 by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, was designed to reveal that women were making art throughout the period however much ignored by the annals of art history.[2]

[1] Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch, MacGibbon & Kee, London, 1971

[2] This exhibition is cited by Svetlana Alpers in 'Art History and Its Exclusions: The Example of Dutch Art', *Feminism and Art History*, N. Broude & M. Garrad (eds). Harper & Row. New York, 1982, p.183.

In spite of such activities however, there was a growing realisation that the perception of a woman's role as being defined by the domestic private sphere was negatively affecting the possibilities for her increased and broader involvement in the modern public space. As a consequence, as I have discussed in chapter two, feminists explored the divisions between public and private, and philosophised about the injustices resulting from them.

Feminism's earliest slogan, 'the personal is political'[3], was an attempt to conflate the public and private spaces as a means of empowering women. Feminists began to question those ideologies which always placed the interests and concerns of women in a subsidiary and negatively valued relationship to those of men. Linda Nochlin herself wrote what is regarded as the first feminist treatise questioning the assumptions of art history in 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'[4] In it she raised questions about art history and its presumptions, suggesting that an unbiased consideration of the subject of women in art could become a catalyst for a paradigm shift in the foundations of art historical thinking. In the years since, espousing a theory of difference developed by feminist philosophers including Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Moira Gatens and many others, women artists have utilised textile and women's domestic craft as a material symbol of Otherness. In so doing they draw attention to the different life experiences and alternative perspectives that women have, and they challenge the single-minded and patriarchal nature of existing power structures. For example, in the USA in the late 1970s, Miriam Schapiro coined the term 'femmage', a variant of the term 'collage'. In the work produced, in which she referenced quilting and embroidery as well as using swatches of

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However Alpers is critical of the exhibition for its narrow focus - on painting and for its bolstering of a definable stylistic sequence in the traditional art historical sense. In other words while it inserted women into the history it did not question the foundations of that history.

[3] A. Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K., 1991, p.93. According to Phillips, the slogan 'the personal is political':

> was initially a riposte to male politicos in the civil rights and socialist / radical movements...From the middle of the 1960s, women in a number of advanced capitalist countries (though most markedly in the USA) were beginning to question their treatment in Left organisations.

Women had become involved in these movements, apparently taking their place as activists in the public sphere, and yet they found that gender confined them to merely supporting roles.

> The men made the decisions while the women typed the leaflets, and despite the supposed joint commitment to liberating the world, the women were still regarded as just a good time in bed.

[4] L. Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' *in Sexist Society. Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds. V.Gornick & B. Moran, New York, 1971, pp480-510.

fabric, Schapiro built on her connections with an authentic tradition and sought to inspire respect for the expressive power of women's domestic textile.[5]

> Like Matisse and Kandinsky before her, Schapiro has taken the product of craft and transported it, through contextual change, into the realm of high art. But with one crucial difference. For when Schapiro incorporates craft into a high art context...she does not treat her sources as borrowings to be transformed. Unlike Matisse and Kandinsky, she does not transform her materials in an effort to erase their original character. Rather she reveals them...as objects of aesthetic value and expressive significance...which express not only the lives and skills and tastes of women but also their undauntable will to create.[6]

Her influence was felt in Australia by artists like Vivienne Binns, who in the late 1970s, as artist in residence at the University of New South Wales, coordinated an exhibition called *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories*. In this exhibition 'the lives of women were recalled and their means of creative expression in the domestic sphere examined [...] There was needlework, crochet work and knitting, as well as the more traditional arts of painting, drawing and pottery.'[7] By such means Binns made a predominantly domestic world visible within the public space and moved to empower the women within it. Additionally, some women artists used art, not only to raise the profile of women in art, but to speak in political terms. In doing so they revealed a willingness to work on community projects as a means of empowering other women to express opinions, using the methods with which they were familiar. So the artists became involved in making artworks such as sewn banners and quilts, sometimes as part of trade union activity, sometimes as part of social activism in projects such as the Names quilt project that arose in response to the Aids epidemic. These are examples to which I shall return in greater detail. At this stage however I will argue that, by these methods and using these materials, these women began doing what many powerful public institutions such as military, judicial and religious establishments have done for years in clothing their

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[5] L. Stein, 'Miriam Schapiro: Woman-Warrior with Lace'. *Fiberarts*, vol 24, no 5, March/April 1998, pp. 35-40.
[6] Norma Broude, 'Miriam Schapiro and "Femmage": Reflections on the Conflict Between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth Century Art' in N. Broude & M. Garrard (eds), op. cit., p.322.
[7] Vivienne Binns, 'Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories' in *Dissonance. Feminism and the Arts 1970–90*, Moore, C. (ed.) Allen & Unwin, 1994, p.71.

representatives in recognisable and distinctive 'uniforms'. That is, these women used textile to embody a sector of society, they identified that sector in the public sphere using a well-established historical tradition (in quilt-making for example), and, by so doing, they endowed that sector of society with power.

Nonetheless, there are difficulties to be confronted when trying to identify textile with the direct use of power because of our designation of textile as a gendered medium associated with the female and the feminine. Based upon the public/private dichotomy, society has been educated to accept textile's close association with the feminised domestic space and thus as being divorced from power. To consider textile as having an alternative role as a technique of power within our social and political institutions requires a shift in focus. Although our history is rich with examples of textile within religious and political ceremony and ritual, it has perhaps been more comfortable to dismiss the use of textile within these established realms as patriarchal in nature and, therefore, in a contemporary world, as of dubious value. Nevertheless, since such usage is long standing and indeed is still current, it certainly constitutes a part of the textile tradition. Such cultural practices form one of our chief means of contextualising our world and our place within in it.[8] We need to consider what it is that has made textile so useful as an emblem of power. Is it its form, its content, its material quality, its associations or some combination of these? What is its current status in these apparently patriarchal areas? Is contemporary art in any way reflective of these issues?

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[8] G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, London, 1988, pp.6–7. Pollock discusses the nature of feminist interventions in the history of art with reference to Marx's analysis of modes of production:

> Theories of representation have been elaborated in relation to Marxist debates about ideology. Ideology does not merely refer to a collection of ideas or beliefs. It is defined as a systematic ordering of a hierarchy of meanings and a setting in place of positions for the assimilation of those meanings. It refers to material practices embodied in concrete social institutions by which the social systems, their conflicts and contradictions are negotiated in terms of the struggles within social formations between the dominant and the dominated, the exploiting and the exploited. In ideology cultural practices are at once the means by which we make sense of the social process in which we are caught up and indeed produced. But it is a site of struggle and confusion for the character if the knowledges are ideological, partial, conditioned by social place and power.

Textile Trappings

Textile has long been implicated in what we call the public domain, the political and social processes at work in Western culture. If we examine the state, juridical, religious and military institutions of the Western world, we will find a pervasive use of textile, which serves to embody these institutions and helps to invest them with authority. Nations and states have flags and banners; churches have richly embroidered panels, cloths and vestments; military groups have uniforms, banners, badges and troop colours, all of which are designed to project a strong public persona grounded in strong historical traditions. In such contexts, textile is heavily invested with the creation and maintenance of identity. It is worth considering how this developed.

As society became ever more complex, the fracturing and multiplication of social forces prompted a proliferation of symbols of signification. Flags and banners figure predominantly in this regard. The history of flags, vexillology, dates the oldest surviving flag, which was in fact metal and not cloth, as an Iranian standard some 5000 years old:

> Because of their inherent symbolism, flags did not evolve randomly or haphazardly merely as decorative art forms, although their origins were undoubtedly ornamental. The earliest known 'flags' were called vexilloids and consisted of poles with emblems or symbols at the top (finials) to represent the group's collective identity as an army, tribe, clan or family. The emblems and colours used generally symbolised the people's rulers or gods. From a contemporary perspective, the vexilloid was not really a flag at all and perhaps could more correctly be described as the precursor to the modern-day flag.[9]

These early flags and standards were made of leather, wood and metal. The first cloth flag was used in the West by the Romans around 100 BC. Cloth flags have become the norm over the past 1000 years, probably for reasons of portability and ease of reproduction, and the invention of the modern-day flag is attributed to the Chinese, who first made the cloth flag, rather than the flagpole and finial, the primary focus of attention. From China, the use of flags spread throughout South East Asia to the Middle

[9] C. Foley, *The Australian Flag: Colonial Relic or Contemporary Icon?*, Federation Press, Sydney, 1996, p.5

East.[10] It seems that it was as a result of the Holy Wars against the Saracens – the Crusades, that flags were introduced to Europe. It was from this time too that the system of heraldry was developed in western Europe.

The history of flags and the study of heraldry are closely related. 'Heraldry (or armory) is a science or art which comprises a system of rules that governs the adoption of symbolic devices and colours as a means of identification.'[11] Feudalism, established upon the system of land ownership and management, is the basis for the development of heraldry. Land in Europe was nominally held by kings who rewarded loyal followers with gifts of parcels of land. In exchange, the landowner undertook to provide the king with manpower for his battles. This was known as a 'knight fee'. This kind of service was costly, and in order to make the imposition easier, landowners would often grant land to knights and other vassals in exchange for a further knight fee. In medieval times when battles were fought all over the countryside and knights came from many different sources, it was necessary to devise an effective means of identification on the battlefield, especially since faces were increasingly obscured by armour. Thus was born the system of colour and symbol used on badges, shields and banners which constitutes heraldry[12]:

> Feudal society was constantly embroiled in feuds which were conducted according to chivalrous ritual and caused immeasurable damage to land and property. Each participant in a passage to arms, whether of a warlike or merely sporting character, wore a coat of arms on his shield, helmet and banner and on the trappings of his horse.[13]

While such a proliferation of signs continued on a local level, the battles of the Crusades hastened such developments even more and nationalistic symbols were developed. Thus, along with other accoutrements, flags and banners that incidentally reflected the inherently religious nature of the undertaking – the defeat of the Infidel by Christian forces – were designed in accordance with heraldic systems and pressed into service:

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[10] ibid, p. 6
[11] ibid., p.6.
[12] S. Oliver, *An Introduction to Heraldry*, Quintet, London, 1987, p.10.
[13] O. Neubecker, *Heraldry: Sources, Symbols and Meanings*, Tiger Books International, London, 1997, p.6.

> As long as such operations were undertaken by relatively small groups of armed men, the need for specific badges was not great; any kind of distinguishing sign would do. However the situation immediately became different when the first Crusade opened the eyes of Europeans, and they found themselves forced to make common cause with neighbours from the same continent, but at the same time needed to keep close to their own countrymen. A sense of national consciousness was revealed, or at least encouraged, by the use of different coloured signs of the cross...[14]

At this stage, flags were the prerogative of monarchs and noblemen and associated with them as personal standards, although there was a close identification of a monarch with his nation-state. Slowly, countries and developing nations began to adopt a national flag as a symbol of the entire nation:

> The first real impetus [...] seems to have begun in Europe in the 16th century with the advent of ocean voyaging beyond the coastal waters, and the resultant necessity for national identification on the high seas – whether for trade, warfare or exploration. Then, in the 18th century, a new emotionalism entered into the relationship between the people and their national flags, as exemplified by the French and American revolutions. Today every nation in the world has adopted a national flag, although, surprisingly, there is no international requirement that they do so.[15]

While I will return to the significance of flags at intervals through the chapter, it can be acknowledged here that this particular textile tradition has a long history and a powerful influence. It is, however, enmeshed in a patriarchal system. Since patriarchal power is typified within feminist philosophy as oppressive, the textile that is connected with such power structures has suffered by the association. It is timely at this point, then, to return to the issue of power and to consider further its nature and its effects within societal structures.

[14] ibid., p.6.
[15] C. Foley, op. cit., p.10.

Power Plays

Early in the chapter I discussed the theory of egalitarian feminism that power within patriarchal society operates as oppression. However, oppressive power enacted through force or threat is only part of the story of power. According to social scientist, Kenneth Boulding,, it takes up its position alongside other complementary types of power, which are just as significant, if not even more important. Boulding analyses power into three different categories: 'oppressive power', which he describes as destructive power, characterised by the threat of unpleasant consequences; 'productive power', which is grounded in economic exchange systems; and 'integrative power', which is social power and is deeply ingrained with notions of legitimacy. He writes that:

> A strong case can be made that integrative power is the most fundamental and the dominant form of power in the sense that it can exist in the kin group, for instance, with a bare minimum of threat and economic power involved, whereas unless both threat and economic power can develop integrative power to go along with them they are very fragile and apt to collapse.[16]

His argument is that each type of power involves the simultaneous operation of elements of the other powers. For example, within religious institutions integrative power may be the strongest element but there are signs of threat power in preachings of hell and damnation and there are traces of productive or economic power in the raising of donations that allow the church to function. It is, however, within the realm of integrative power that we can begin to theorise about the role of textile in terms of its impact within the body politic. In this respect the theories of Michel Foucault are most useful.

Foucault contends that a definition of power as repression 'is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power'[17]. He argues that government from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries onward became a rapidly evolving science, employing new methods of social organization that were much more useful, economical and successful because

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[16] K. Boulding, *Three Faces of Power*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California, 1989, p.6.
[17] P. Rabinow, interview with M. Foucault, 'Truth and power', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow Penguin Books, London, 1991, p.60.

they were based on arguments of social benefit and justice. They thus encouraged compliance through perceptions of reward, both personal and communal. The object of government increasingly became the body of the individual. Rosalyn Diprose, referring to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, encapsulates his argument as follows:

> [Foucault] argues that discipline and surveillance [...] are techniques of power which construct individuals who are compatible with our social and economic system. Individual bodies are *objects* of this operation of power in that they become docile and productive under its exercise. And they are the *instruments* of power in that they become complicit in the discipline and surveillance of both themselves and others (Foucault, 1979:170). As an object and instrument of this productive power, men in public spaces, for example, need no coercion: their ethos [manner of being] becomes co-extensive with the body politic and they take their roles to heart. If the common ethos becomes embodied in an individual ethos in this way, the ability to abstract oneself from this ethos, if not impossible, cannot be assumed.[18]

It is in this sense then, under a notion of power which is integrative and inspires complicity on the basis of a common and ultimately rewarding identity, that textile and its use in hierarchical power structures has operated to legitimate both the body politic and the human, usually male, body within it. Textile functions as one of those images or symbols 'through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment'[19]. Textile artefacts, among which I include uniforms, banners/flags and decorative cloths, endow individuals with an identity in social and political situations. They identify those who belong within the group, they define those outside of the group and they emphasise the fact of there being a group of which it is possible to be part. To give a specific example, not only do military groups and institutions march and serve under the national flag but they also parade under their own separate and distinctive military colours. These regimental colours are of the utmost significance to contemporary military units and a

[18] R. Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, Routledge, London, 1994, p.22.
[19] M. Gatens, preface, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London, 1996, p.viii.

flag carried by a particular unit or person into battle may become significant because of the actions of that unit or person:

> Because of Australia's British heritage many Australian military traditions follow the British model. The Sovereign's Colours of the Army, Air Force and Navy have a special place and are used only for ceremonial purposes. These Colours are presented to the regiment, ship or establishment by a member of the British Royal family or the Monarch's representative and are consecrated by a chaplain in a prescribed ceremony. Old Colours, which are decommissioned or go out of service when new Colours are presented, have usually been laid up in a church where traditionally they were left to rot. The laying up of Colours has been compared to burial and the subsequent removal of these Colours to an exhumation.[20]

These flags are not just pieces of textile but have a special significance that makes their care and handling of great importance. Today, there is a move away from laying flags up in a church. This is due to the recognition that museums such as the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, which was conceived in 1917 as a repository for the material relics collected to commemorate those who fell in battle, have the knowledge and facilities to extend the life of a flag.[21] In addition, many early flags and regimental colours were hand-stitched and embroidered by women in the local community or the community represented by the regiment.[22] The community has an increased desire to preserve the stories of these women, and their families, as part of the history of the nation. 'However there are some conservative elements within the Army who still feel that we can only pay respect to these Colours by laying them up in a church or memorial

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[20] From an unpublished paper compiled by Catherine Challenor and Wendy Dodd at the Australian War Memorial, given at a conference in Ottawa in 1997 and kindly provided to me by Wendy Dodd.

[21] *The Hall of Memory*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1984:

> The news that each soldier could thus help to keep alive the memory of his fallen comrades and of his regiment led to intense activity in collecting...To the resulting collection were added the paintings by official artists, the photographic records and, later, models of the regions fought through and of famous incidents, as well as valuable relics and records given by service men and their relations and by many others . It was decided that those who lost their lives in both wars should be commemorated in the same memorial; and its scope has been widened to include all men and women who have died as a result of any war or warlike operations in which Australians have been on active service.

[22] For instance, in the collection of the Queensland Military Museum is a regimental ensign which was made by the girls of All Hallows School in Brisbane and sent to the 26th Battalion AIF in 1916 and flown at battalion headquarters in France and Belgium until 1918. The ensign is of green cotton with six small 26th Battalion AIF colour patches and a large central patch with an embroidered 'Rising Sun' and ANZAC. Australian Museums and Galleries Online: <http://amol.org.au>

and allowing them to fade away.'[23] Medals and insignia are also important relics of recognition that use textile in the form of ribbons and coloured braid. Armbands are also preserved in the War Memorial, bands such as those worn by civilian defence organisation members, concentration camp prisoners[24] or ambulance crew in military situations. One interesting exhibit is an armband supposedly worn by one of Simpson's donkeys.[25] It originally belonged to Colonel Alfred Sutton of the 3rd Field Ambulance. Colonel Sutton wanted the donkey to be 'a proper member of the Unit'. Removing his own armband, he tied it round the donkey's head so that it would "officially" belong to the Field Ambulance.'[26] Within these various military groups, textile has assumed an extraordinary importance and has played an enormous part in the process of legitimising procedures and customs that are part of the binding together of the people involved. It is an important visible means of symbolising the common ethos of these military groups so that, in Foucault's terms, its individual members 'need no coercion: their ethos [manner of being] becomes co-extensive with the body politic and they take their roles to heart'[27].

However, while in many cases membership of the group may be a reasonable aspiration, it can obviously work the other way. Certain artefacts may signal a group to which it is considered undesirable to belong – for instance, the fabric gold stars, which were forcibly sewn onto the clothes of Jewish citizens in wartime Nazi Germany and its occupied territories to identify them as objectionable outsiders to the German nation. This cloth star was designed to become a public symbol of fear and loathing. It provided a focus of hatred and derision in the face of difficulty and uncertain times and diverted attention away from the political leadership of the time.

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[23] C. Challenor & W. Dodd, op. cit.
[24] Whilst these bands were originally intended as a symbol of inferiority and subordination, it can be argued that in the context of the War Memorial they represent a group of people often to be admired for their stoicism and strength in the face of incredible adversity.
[25] Australian War Memorial, display label: 'Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick, stretcher bearer, used donkeys to bring wounded men to the beach.' (Noted on personal visit, 1998.)
[26] Australian War Memorial, display label on artefact. (Noted on personal visit, 1998.)
[27] See footnote 17, this chapter.

Jewish Textiles

Whilst throughout the world the history of textile production and use is rich and varied I have chosen to particularly discuss Jewish textile. This is partly because, in the face of the Diaspora and the enormous pressures on their continuing existence as a race, the Jewish people have relied heavily upon the use of textile to bind them symbolically. In addition I was attracted to the sometimes fragile and commonplace simplicity of their textile in contrast with some of the sumptuous copes and chasubles of the Christian Church: '...throughout the Middle Ages, the finest works of art were made for the glory of the Church.'[28] I was drawn also to their utilitarian quality, the link between ritual and personal history: 'the circumcision cloth becomes a binder for the *Torah*; under their wedding attire, the couple wear their shrouds (Ben Am), a man is buried in his *tallit* (ritual prayer shawl).'[29]

Boulding, in a discussion of nation states, comments that:

> The Jews survived more than 2500 years of military defeat, expulsion, and the loss of a national state because of their extraordinary integrative power. Now that they have chosen to develop a national state of Israel, and rely on threat and military power, their integrative power has inevitably declined. Unfortunately, historians have been very insensitive to the realities of integrative power and hence its history largely remains to be written; yet the evidence is very strong that integrative power is the most important of the three, and without it, neither military power nor economic power can persist for very long.[30]

There is no denying the Jewish people's extraordinary success in maintaining a strong national identity in the face of a long history of almost overwhelming odds. Since Boulding attributes this to their extraordinary integrative power, it is significant that Jewish customs and religion register a very pervasive textile content. In 1997 an

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[28] J. Spier & G. Morrison, *San Marco and Venice*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, 1997, p.13. The catalogue contains images of two opulent copes of the 15th and 16th centuries, both of which seem to have been adapted from gifts by rich persons of some status. 'It was a common custom for persons of high rank to make gifts of their ceremonial robes to the Church so these could be reworked into vestments for the clergy.' P.70.

[29] Naomi Cass, 'To Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah', *Material Treasures*, exhibition catalogue, Jewish Museum of Australia, 1997, p.10.

[30] K. Boulding, op. cit., p.50.

exhibition entitled *Material Treasures*, which comprised elements of the textile collection of the Jewish Museum of Australia, was displayed at Melbourne's Jewish Museum. In the catalogue introduction Dr Helen Light, the Director/Curator of the Jewish Museum of Australia writes:

> These treasures are the material heritage of the enormously diverse history, culture and background of today's Australian Jewish Community. Coming from all over the world, they have travelled from Europe, from communities truncated or decimated, from Palestine or the Middle East. Implicit in each cloth is not only its intended function but also the particular local and cultural aesthetic, be it German or Bokharan, Turkish or Polish.
>
> Wonderfully rich and luxurious, sometimes simple and humble, the diverse functions for which these textiles were created attests to the full scope of Jewish life. From religious worship and the marking of Jewish life cycle events to simple domestic needs and pleasures to historical events, each is evidence of the toil and skill of the women who fashioned them.[31]

The work on display was divided into categories which referred to the roles that textile is called upon to play within Jewish culture. They included Cloths of Holiness, Cloths of Prayer, Cloths of Celebration, Cloths of History, as well as Cloths for Festivals and Garments of the Diaspora. Among the Cloths of Holiness were many examples of the Parokhet or Ark Curtain:

> (A) curtain which divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Tabernacle...Ark curtains particularly, represent recycling of domestic garments or furnishing fabrics. Such fabrics may be reworked or simply cut and stitched together, incorporating any other scraps of the best fabric available. With the addition of an embroidered or appliquéd dedicatory text – as well as symbols...and rampant lions – a lesser textile is converted to the second most holy object in the Synagogue.[32]

This signifies the place where the Torah or Holy Book of the Jewish religion is housed. The Torah is a written scroll that contains the whole body of Jewish traditional teaching and learning and, being the basis of their whole way of life, is housed within the Ark, the

[31] H. Light, 'Introduction', *Material Treasures*, exhibition catalogue, Jewish Museum of Australia, 1997, p.5.

most sacred part of a Jewish synagogue. The Torah is covered with a Torah mantle and bound with Torah binders or wimpels. In Germany these are traditionally made from the circumcision sheet of an infant, which is cut into four strips, re-sewn and embroidered or painted with the boy's name, date of birth and blessings. It is then presented to the synagogue at the child's first visit and subsequently used to bind the Torah from which the boy reads on the occasion of his *Bar Mitzvah.*[33] In Italy the tradition is somewhat different in that the binders are often made and specially embroidered to commemorate a particular person or an occasion such as a betrothal or wedding.[34] Significantly, a humble circumcision cloth is re-made in order to both house and occupy the most important space within the Jewish religious life. The strong and overt connection between the body of the individual and the body of the Church is startling.

Interestingly, the Cloths of Holiness often reveal regional differences because they are sometimes made from local textiles converted for the purpose: 'for instance a Turkish Prayer rug may be converted with addition of text' in order to 'designate a Jewish context on Moslem Prayer rugs'[35]. Thus individuality within the group was not discouraged, the Jewish ritual and symbol being cohesive enough to allow for such personal cultural touches. Regarding this issue, the curator of the exhibition, Naomi Cass, writes that:

> Each object bears witness to the continuity of Jewish tradition and the imperative of crafts-people to innovate. Textile Judaeica is particularly open to regional and personal expression, firstly because textiles are so vulnerable to damage and secondly because textiles have always been a living tradition.
>
> How do we account for the enormous regional differences in Jewish textiles, even the inclusion of non-Jewish elements? Ita Aber reflects upon this when she explains that symbols familiar in the Russian Pale are generally not seen in the works of Jews from North Africa and the Mediterranean and vice versa. Yet, for her, the presence of a *mezuzah* (door post parchment) at the threshold of a Jewish home, anywhere in the world leads to and signifies a special Jewish world, often brimming over with textiles. Wherever Jewish

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[32] *Material Treasures*, exhibition catalogue, Jewish Museum of Australia, 1997, p.21.
[33] ibid., p.38.
[34] ibid., p.24.
[35] ibid., pp.21–22

communities reside, local symbols, techniques and customs are quite literally 'converted' to Judaism.[36]

There are two possible conclusions to be drawn from this quick survey of Jewish culture and the dominant place of textile within their religious structures. First, it may be that textile has been so useful to the Jews because for so long they have been a people without a land. They have not had the opportunity to erect more permanent and lasting symbols of their religion and culture, the stone buildings and monolithic sculptures of other societies of both the East and the West. Textile has been both portable and adaptable and has been very successful, if Boulding's comments about the Jews' superior integrative power are to be accepted, in helping to preserve the Jews as a nation, given that they have had no established national space or place.[37] Interestingly, however, despite the prevalence of textile in their culture, the national flag of Israel was only introduced in 1948 with the establishment of the new nation state. Perhaps national flags embody land rather than people?[38]

Second, it seems that the Jewish culture has gone some way towards breaking down the barriers between the public religious space and the private domestic space. Traditionally, within their tabernacles, women do not publicly participate in the religious ceremonies to the same degree as men. They are physically separated from the men during religious services and are seated in separate sections of the building while they watch the conduct of the service by the male elders. However, the fact that their textile artefacts play such a prominent public part and occupy the holiest of spaces within the body of their church seems to indicate that women, through the products of their labour, do play a significant role in the conduct of Jewish religious and cultural life. In similar fashion of course, the women of the Christian religion also create the vestments, altar-cloths and prayer cushions for their churches although the use of second-hand or recycled textile of a domestic or personal nature is, as far as I am aware, unusual.

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[36] N. Cass, *Material Treasures*, exhibition catalogue, Jewish Museum of Australia, 1997, p.9.

[37] For this insight I am indebted to Dr Ian McLean, Senior Lecturer, School of Architecture and Fine Art, University of Western Australia.

[38] See earlier discussion in this chapter regarding feudalism and its basis in land ownership.

Textile as Symbol

Down the centuries, in many parts of the world, textiles have been employed as an adjunct to authority and order. This can be true both of societies rich in material wealth and of societies of more simple means.

> In the hierarchical societies of Oceania differences in the quality and decoration of clothing denoted the social rank of the wearer. The *tiputas* (poncho-like garments) of chieftains and nobles consisted of paper-thin layers of *tapa* cloth (bark of paper-mulberry tree) felted and pasted together with a very fine, bleached top layer which was then decorated, whereas those of lower rank were obliged to wear undecorated *tiputas*...Similarly, in the later years of imperial China embroidery on official robes functioned as a means of advertising status and authority within the court hierarchy.[39]

The use of textile in terms of ornament, uniform or other such artefact actually has at least two purposes. First it clothes a leader with authority and makes him/her visible – within religious ceremony, for example, where special robes and cloths identify the central figure of the clergyman: 'The spokesman is the substitute of the group which exists only through this delegation and which acts and speaks through him. He is the group personified'[40]. The second use of textile in this context is to take the individual in the leader to one remove from the position so that the organisation is not represented by individuals as such, but by symbols of the organisation. This is seen to be of considerable importance for the durable nature of the organisation and for its appeal to a wide variety

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[39] J. Harris (ed.) 500 years of Textiles, British Museum Press, London, 1993, pp. 11-12.

[40] P. Bourdieu, 'Social space and symbolic power', in *In Other Words: Essays towards a Reflexive Sociology*, transl. M Adamson, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1990, p.139. In this article Bourdieu argues that 'social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of life-styles and status groups, characterized by different life-styles'. Further:

> Symbolic power, whose most exemplary form is seen in the power to produce groups [...] is based on two conditions Firstly, like every form of performative discourse, symbolic power has to be based on the possession of symbolic capital (which) depends on the social authority acquired in previous struggles. Symbolic capital is a credit, it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition [..] Secondly, symbolic effectiveness depends on the degree to which the vision proposed is based on reality. Evidently, the construction of groups cannot be a construction *ex nihilo*. It has all the more chance of succeeding the more it is founded in reality. that is, as I have said, in the objective affinities between people who have to be brought together [...] The struggles of classifications is the fundamental division of class struggles. The power of imposing a vision of divisions, that is the power of making visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is the political power *par excellence*: it is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society.

of individuals. In other words, the position of power exceeds or transcends the body of the individual.

In these ways textile as material artefact is invested with the symbolic power to reflect or represent the corporeal body of a group or institution. I want to return here to a consideration of the use of a national flag:

> National flags are held in the highest esteem and have the greatest significance. They evoke great emotion and are often considered to be sacred. They are regarded as symbols of and the property of the people [...] In some countries the respect displayed towards the flag is similar to that previously accorded to royalty. The national anthem is sung in honour of the flag rather than a monarch. The desecration of a flag is considered to be a major insult and in some countries is an offence [...] The capture of a flag carries with it a sense of victory over ones [sic] foes, and the planting of ones [sic] own flag signals triumph over enemies or over nature.[41]

The quest for an Australian national flag, although under the Howard conservative government currently in abeyance, has been a matter for debate within Australia as the nation grapples with its contentious past and attempts to provide a national symbol of significance for all its inhabitants.[42] In a nation which is racked by controversy over its indigenous population and which has prided itself on its multicultural nature, this is no easy task:

> The designs and colours of modern national flags have not developed arbitrarily, but have been carefully chosen to reflect the historical, cultural and religious background of the particular country, and to represent the land, government and ideals of the people [...] the design marks out the common relationship which exists between the particular people that comprise the nation or region, as against the rest of the world. This means that the design should promote the significant similarities between the people and dispense with the

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This gives some indication of the power and importance of an artefact, which aids this *manipulation.*

[41] C. Challenor & W. Dodd, op. cit.

[42] An interesting history of the development of early Australian flags as forerunners of the current design is contained in F. Cayley, *Beneath the Southern Cross: The Story of Australia through Flags*, Reed Books, 1980.

insignificant differences so that the resulting flag is truly representative of their common bonds and reflects the national ideal.[43]

The Australian flag carries a smaller version of the red, white and blue British Union Jack in its top left-hand corner. The main body of the flag is blue and beneath the Union Jack is a large white Commonwealth Star with seven points. The Star symbolises the legal union of the Australian Colonies in 1901 to form the Commonwealth of Australia. While there were six federating states the seventh point originally represented the Territory of Papua New Guinea, newly acquired in 1905. This Territory is now independent but the seventh point has come to represent all the Commonwealth territories. To the right of the flag are five white stars representing the Southern Cross.[44] Debate about the current Australian flag has reflected community concerns about the legitimacy of the message, the inclusion of another country's flag and the lack of representation of a significant group - Aboriginal people, descendants of the original inhabitants of the country. In other words for whom does this piece of textile speak and what is it saying? There are many non-indigenous Australians who believe that the current flag speaks a language that is abhorrent. In 1981 the flag was described by Labor Senator, Gareth Evans as 'an undistinguished and indistinctive bit of cloth inherited from our colonial past.'[45] It is seen as deeply offensive to the Aboriginal community and as reflective of Australia's divisive colonial history.

The Aboriginal people have devised their own flag which was first flown in July 1971. This flag is divided in half horizontally with a large central golden circle representing the sun, the life force. The top half of the background is black personifying the Aboriginal people and the lower half is red, representing their blood shed since colonisation. The flying of this flag has sometimes caused controversy as when, for example, it has been flown at international sporting events. Perhaps the most potent symbolism of the national flag in Australian terms was the sight of athlete Cathy Freeman clothing herself in both

[43] C. Foley, *The Australian Flag: Colonial Relic or Contemporary Icon?,* The Federation Press, Sydney, 1996, pp.10–11.
[44] ibid, pp. 80-82
[45] Ibid, p.91.

Australian and Aboriginal flags after winning a Commonwealth Games gold medal in 1994. By this gesture she characterised herself as an Australian with a dual heritage and by clothing herself with a piece of textile, a symbol whose inherent material flexibility permits such an act, attempted to integrate both aspects of her heritage. Whilst the Aboriginal flag usually stands in opposition to the Australian national flag Freeman momentarily and symbolically united them and through them two disparate nations.

Whilst I have discussed flags as symbols of powerful existing political entities, they can also be used as other than national flags, although their purpose may be similar:

> Prior to the 19th century the flag was the symbol of the authority of the church or state rather than being a symbol of the people. The raising of national consciousness during events such as the French Revolution encouraged the use of flags by dissident voices. Political movements such as unions of students or workers adopted flags to represent their aims and ideals. As with other flags they were used as rallying points. The flags of some of these dissident voices have become national flags. The French Tricolour is an excellent example.[46]

In cases such as these the purpose of the flag is to unite disparate people in the subversion of official power and authority. For Foucault, let us recall, power is not always negative or repressive. For Foucault the existence of power always carries with it the real possibility of subversion or the expression of individual freedom:

> What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.[47]

In other words it can be social power, the power to integrate. In such cases the power of the flag serves to integrate those sharing a common cause. Their unity may not be a lasting state but a strategic enterprise. Accordingly, the flag under these circumstances

[46] C. Challenor & W. Dodd, op. cit.

may also act as the material incorporation of social bodies initially or ultimately characterised as subversive and its power in this regard is drawn from a long history of integrative action. It has often been an important part of the process of configuring diverse communities and groups, some of whom would be recognised as occupying positions outside of the accepted political power structures.

However, flags are not the only form of textile to be used in this way. In my discussion in chapter one of the work of Lorraine Hepburn, whose exhibition of quilts highlighted the issue of domestic violence, I have already noted the use of a 'cosy' domestic textile as a subversive instrument of defiance that targeted the realm of the domestic space. Another textile-related enterprise of contemporary subversion has been the Names project,[48] a textile undertaking aimed at identifying and uniting families and individuals touched by the deadly HIV/AIDS virus, honouring family members lost and protesting at their segregation from an apparently uncaring society. In this worldwide project, family members and friends of those who died as a result of the AIDS virus were encouraged to make a quilt in their memory. In Australia the project began in Sydney in 1988:

> The Quilt was made up of panels made by friends or family of someone who had died, and each panel contained personally significant images or messages. Again, a quilt helped with mourning, both through the process of making and through the finished panel which became a memorial when assembled into the larger whole. The Quilt was displayed, in parts or altogether, in all states and territories of Australia, making a sober and loving testimony to the lives lost.[49]

While the quilt carries connotations of comfort and while certainly solace for the bereaved was an effect of making a public tribute to their loved ones, the quilts were also dissident. Since AIDS' sufferers were considered to be outside the boundaries of 'normal, healthy' societies, the action of making them visible was defiant. The quilts 'flagged' a

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[47] P. Rabinow op. cit., p.61.

[48] V. Rigney, *The Contemporary Art of Banner Making*, Glasgow Museum, 1992.
The Names Project established in the United States also appropriates the traditional American quilt format to make a statement about a disease [...] Using the quilt format for this issue is almost provocative as it represents the epitome of conservative American values. The Project has staged massive 'unravellings' of hundreds of panels all stitched together...

[49] M. Rolfe, *Quilt Heritage*, Fairfax Press, 1998, p.95.

group of people who had died as a result of a supposedly 'disreputable' disease. These 'bedroom' textiles, with their connotations of comfort and intimacy, were made by ordinary men and women who refused to let their loved ones remain anonymous and unacknowledged. Margaret Rolfe describes one such quilt:

> Brian Earl made a panel for Stuart Challender, the conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, who died in 1991. Brian sewed the quilt panel for Stuart's friend, Wendy, who did not sew. On the panel he appliquéd 'Der Rosenkavalier' (the last opera Stuart Challender conducted), and also appliquéd a silver rose, to represent the one in the opera that was later given to Stuart.[50]

In the Names' project the medium of textile served to delineate and represent a specific group – Aids sufferers and their families in a move towards recognition and empowerment. It is as a result of an established but relatively unexplored association of textile and power in Western culture, as a result of an historical use of ceremonial textile practices that make individuals and groups visible, that textile holds its contemporary subversive credentials. Textile is a technique of power/empowerment, whose efficacy in this respect derives from longstanding traditions that relate to the creation and maintenance of identity as a means of social integration – the integrative power of Boulding's theories. This argument does not act in opposition to a feminist emphasis upon the domestic textile but in fact builds upon its basic precepts.

In this chapter's exploration of the associations of textile and power, the symbolic and representational nature of textile including flags, military and religious regalia and even quilts has been demonstrated. Its flexibility, portability, ability to absorb colour and to be fashioned into many symbolic images, as in heraldic devices for instance, render it a material artefact of enormous representational richness. Whilst here I have examined textile in general terms it will be useful now to investigate in greater detail the kind of textile that has been produced in Australia, to consider who made it and for what purpose. Much of the textile held within Australian museums has been made by women. The theories of Anne Summers, who believed that the role of women in the development of

[50] M. Rolfe, Australian Quilt Heritage, J.B.Fairfax Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, p.95.

the Australian community has not been properly recorded and assessed, and the theories of Boulding and Foucault regarding the value of an integrative or productive power are certainly relevant to my investigations.

Chapter Four

TEXTILE IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Ellen Green
***Guild of Perseverance*, c.1890**

Source: J. Kerr (ed.), *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, Craftsman House, Roseville, NSW, 1995

Chapter Four

TEXTILE IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

In order to put contemporary Australian textile art into some sort of historical context it is useful to consider the nature of some of Australia's earlier textile pieces and to explore, wherever possible, the social and community roles of the people, often women, who made them. That the social and historical aspect of textile is important is borne out by the comments of contemporary artists in the questionnaire I distributed at a major textile conference.[1] Participants were asked the following question: 'Are there any other reasons why you choose to work with textile or fibre (e.g. paper) as a major component of or inspiration for your art-work?' A typical response was:

> Its connection with other cultures and with other people throughout history. It is the oldest (craft?) in the form of baskets. I feel linked to people through time and space when I weave.[2]

However, I should state that, since my aim is to provide a background against which current practice may be usefully evaluated, this historical survey is in the nature of a brief overview rather than an in-depth analysis.

I have filtered this historical survey of Australian textile through some of the ideas I have earlier explored – textile in public and private spaces, identity, women as 'God's Police', the family as a strong cultural influence in the development of the Australian community. Ultimately, textile as 'an emblem of power'[3] and its influence upon public perceptions have been the key issues.[4] That influence, however, may only have become apparent over

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[1] *Shift 98*, a national contemporary textile symposium held in Canberra in July 1998.
[2] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 8, no. 34.
[3] See Chapter Three of this thesis.
[4] Clothes also represent textile. Costume and the subject of fashion is one of historical concern and often represented in historical displays. The Yesteryear Costume Gallery in Orroroo, South Australia, exhibits many items of clothing dating back to 1830. Every item in the collection is catalogued and its history noted

time and as a result of changing attitudes. To find examples of textile in Australian history I relied on museums and existing texts about Australian textile. Art galleries also hold textile in their collection and information about them is to be found in chapter six.

Museum Collections

It is the function of museums to collect and classify our heritage. The process of collection and classification can be a contentious issue – just like beauty, value can be defined as 'in the eye of the beholder'[5]. So what do museums collect, and why? How do they classify textile in their collection?

Theoretically, finding examples of older textile would not be an easy task since textile is a notoriously difficult material artefact to preserve. However, in practice, initial attempts to identify examples of earlier Australian textiles held in museum collections foundered to some extent on the sheer magnitude of the task. I requested information from Australian museums about their collections in terms of textile that assumes some social or political significance in a community sense in the lives of ordinary people within Australian society. I asked specifically about national flags and banners as well as textile associated with the common social occasions of weddings, births and deaths. While many museums did not reply and some wrote that they had little of special significance, Ian McShane, the Senior Curator of Australian Social History at the National Museum of Australia, replied that the Museum's collection of such material was:

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with the aim of acting as an educational resource for new generations. The Gallery's promotional material notes that:

> Of interest is a black wedding dress which, according to research, was not uncommon at Lutheran weddings. Wedding gowns came in many colours before the turn of the century. .it is through costumes such as these that people of today can share the time and hardships the older generation experienced. .

The Gallery also holds christening gowns of the Victorian era and mourning wear. A detailed study could be made of such artefacts. However, this fell beyond the bounds of this thesis.

[5] D. Dolan, 'Community v. public perceptions of cultural value', in *Museum National*, vol. 8, no. 1, August 1999, p.14:

> In any town or region, there are often discrepancies between what is most valued by the local community and what interests 'experts', the authorities, tourists, or other visitors from the wider public [...] Heritage is always political and frequently controversial. Many controversies centre on discrepancies between a local community's valuations of a place and state-level 'expert' or official evaluations of it [...] It is a matter of frames of reference.

> ...in the high hundreds perhaps [which] in some way relate[s] to the historical and contemporary use of textiles. These collections range from clothing, household soft furnishings, ceremonial and/or symbolic use of textile (national or ethnic costume, flags, textiles as banners or for political campaigning/sloganeering, textiles used in the construction of religious or quasi-religious costume, eg masonic regalia, textiles as a medium for craft work and/or economic production (batik from Ernabella, quilts and embroideries etc), textiles kept for cultural associations and symbols (eg textiles brought to Australia by migrants), textiles used in the performing arts (usually as costume)...[6]

McShane also emphasised that textile pieces held by the Museum were collected for their social history value, often forming part of what he called 'a larger mixed-media collection'. This is a comment that proved true of other collections. Consequently it has been difficult within the scope of this study to conduct any in-depth analysis. However some general comments can be made based upon the classifications that some of the museums have used in order to situate textile within their collections. Themes such as 'Domestic and community life', 'Migration and settlement' and 'Nationalism and heritage' have been used for this purpose.

In early 2001 I visited the website of the Museum of Victoria, which at this time had organised its collections into four main groups – 'Indigenous', 'Australian Society', 'Technology' and 'Natural Sciences'. Within the Australian Society collection the artefacts were further categorised into the thematic areas of 'Childhood', 'Coins, medals and stamps', 'Domestic and community life', 'Migration and settlement', 'Public and institutional life' and 'Working life'[7]. Textile-related items in the 'Domestic and community life' section included the Prue Acton fashion design collection, which was described as having national significance because of Prue Acton's status as a leading Australian fashion designer in the 1970s. Other elements were the Steinberg Drapery

[6] I. McShane, Senior Curator, Australian Social History, National Museum of Australia, Canberra, personal correspondence, Oct. 1997.

[7] Museum Victoria website <http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/> lists national costumes as well as weaving and items from sources as diverse as Latvia and the Hmong, Hindeloopen and African Women's Association collections. Site visited 14/3/02. Visited again 28/9/02 when I discovered that significant changes had been made to the website. The collections are now listed under only three main headings – 'Indigenous cultures', 'Australian society and technology' and 'Sciences'. The details referenced above are no longer available on the website.

Shop in Carlton and rites of passage clothing. Some textile-related items were listed under 'Migration and settlement', as well as under the 'Working life' classification. One such section is the Simpson's Glove Factory collection, acquired in 1989 when the factory relocated. Also mentioned are historical trade union Eight Hour Day banners, a relic of nineteenth-century unionism. These will be considered in greater depth in a later chapter.

Within museum culture the theme of migration and settlement recurs regularly, which is unsurprising, given Australia's history of immigration and the lively debate regarding multiculturalism. Textile in museums often relates to these themes. For instance, visiting the website of the National Museum in Canberra,[8] I found a traditional Kastellorizo costume made in the early 1920s used as an example of the art of conservation. This complete traditional woman's bridal costume was brought to Australia in 1949 and handed down within the donor's family before being bequeathed to the Museum. It represents a lost art, a dying tradition and a piece of Australia's cultural heritage and identity. Similarly, South Australia's Migration Museum, which opened in Adelaide in 1986, holds a series of over thirty banners, made by South Australian groups and individuals as a result of an invitation from the Museum to record their immigration story as an ongoing project. The fabric banners come from groups as diverse as the American Rug Hooking Group, the Scottish Association, the Ukrainian Women's Association, the Australian Japan Society and the Adelaide Hebrew Congregation. The banners contain symbols representative of both the old country and the new homeland of Australia. For instance the Ukrainian banner contains:

> A border of grapes in traditional Ukrainian embroidery [...] A diagonal cord separates the *kalyna*, national flower of Ukraine from the Sturt pea, symbol of South Australia. These images powerfully depict the links between the two areas and achieve Kateryna Kaczmarsky's aim of 'showing comparable traditions from Ukraine and from South Australia'[9].

[8] National Museum of Australia website <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections/kastor/significance.html>
[9] From information supplied by the Migration Museum, Kintore Avenue, Adelaide.

Also in South Australia is the Latvian Ethnic Museum, which holds a collection of ethnic costumes, both male and female, from the various Latvian regions. Some of the costumes originated in Latvia before World War II and many have been made in Australia. Choir members and folk dancers wear the costumes at special occasions, such as art festivals. The museum also displays woven wall hangings, linen tablecloths and other domestic items.[10] Textiles in these contexts represent different cultures and embody a sense of belonging, a concern with personal identity. They are significant artefacts whose preservation indicates a determination to conserve important distinctive and representative elements of a cultural lifestyle even as members work towards settling within a new Australian community. Displaying them in a public space affords them visibility, keeps them in the public eye, empowers the people they represent as a presence in Australia's community.

The Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney, NSW, also has a twentieth century immigration collection, which, at the time of my correspondence in 1997, contained nine textile items. These include a wedding dress brought by an Italian migrant bride, a Lithuanian costume and a blanket brought by a Lithuanian migrant in 1948, a banner from the Vietnamese community commemorating the Vietnamese boat refugees lost at sea as well as items of Vietnamese refugee clothing from the 1970s.[11] The National Maritime Museum also holds some older textile pieces. These include a souvenir patriotic kerchief from the post–World War I era, on which is the caption, 'A SOUVENIR OF THE GREAT WORLD WAR AND THE GLORIOUS PART PLAYED BY AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND'; a heart-shaped pin-cushion from the early 1920s,

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[10] Rasma Lacis, Latvian Museum, Wayville, South Australia. Personal correspondence, 1997. Rasma informed me that the Lithuanian community in Adelaide have a similar museum, and also provided me with a contact for the Latvian Association in Tasmania. She passed on some published information about the distinctive traits of Latvian design as used in textiles and jewellery, as follows:
Dzervitis, 'Latvju raksti', Amber Printers & Publishers, Toronto, in assoc. with Latvian Federation, 1973:

> It is characteristic of Latvian design that most artisans do not merely copy existing designs – they create their own variations on a traditional theme [...] the design elements used in Latvian handicrafts have not changed much over the centuries. Their enduring life, and the imagination and skill devoted to their development into designs seems to indicate that these symbols have more than a purely decorative significance. Research into their meaning, therefore, followed the hypothesis that the basic elements of Latvian design were originally magical symbols related to the deities of an agrarian culture.

[11] Helen Trepa, Curator of Twentieth century immigration and passenger travel, personal correspondence, October 1997.

apparently made as a love token by a sailor on HMAS *Sydney*; a sailor's handkerchief from 1898; and a woolwork embroidery of a barque with national flags, dated somewhere between 1850 and 1900.[12] These textiles are the residues of a material culture of another time – pieces of the past which are seen as important in the constitution of Australia's identity. Humble artefacts on their own, encased within a public museum they have the power to give visibility to the ordinary people whose actions and presence here have created the Australian story.

The Bowman flag of 1806, preserved in the Mitchell Library in the State Library of New South Wales, is also a piece of the past. This painted silk flag, containing a mixture of Australian and British heraldic motifs (rose, shamrock and thistle) is the earliest known example of Australian native fauna (emu and kangaroo) being used on an Australian coat of arms. Attributed to eleven-year-old Mary Bowman,[13] and reputedly made from her mother's wedding gown, it was flown at the Bowman property 'Archerfield' near Richmond in New South Wales to celebrate Admiral Nelson's victory at Trafalgar in 1805. Joan Kerr describes it as the earliest recorded artwork by a European woman permanently resident in Australia.[14] It is interesting to speculate as to why an Australian coat of arms should be used to celebrate a European victory. It seems to indicate a strong sense of an Australian pride of place whilst still acknowledging a European sense of ancestry or origin.

The major repository of military memorabilia is, of course, the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. There are about 1,300 flags in the Memorial's collection, most with a military association, although some are associated with sporting events and some are propaganda flags. Many are flags captured in battle. Great significance was placed on the capture of an enemy flag. Flying one's own flag at a higher level than that of another

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[12] Jennifer Bradley, Project Assistant, Collections and Exhibition Branch, personal correspondence, October 1997.

[13] J. Kerr, op. cit., p.244. However, in F. Cayley, op. cit., p.47, Cayley asserts that the flag was designed and made by Mary's father, John Bowman. 'He had no thought of designing an Australian national flag. He merely intended it to be a symbol of Australia's unity with Britain and of Australian pride in the achievements of the mother country.' Apart from this fact, both authors agree on the other elements of the story.

[14] J. Kerr, op. cit, p.244.

country asserted one's superiority. The collection also contains uniforms, souvenirs, prisoner of war items and memorabilia from the home front.[15]

Amongst the most famous of the non-military textiles kept on permanent display at the War Memorial are the Changi Quilts, two of three signature quilts made by women interned in Changi Prison after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese. The quilts were made for the Red Cross: 'The idea was that the quilts could be a vehicle of communication to the men in the big military camps nearby'[16]. However, many of the squares were embroidered just as a means of passing the time and were not necessarily made as objects of resistance.[17] One of the three quilts was made for the wounded Australian soldiers, one for the British soldiers and one for the Japanese. It was hoped that this even-handed approach would increase the likelihood of the quilts arriving at their destination - a political decision! The quilts consist of embroidered squares of varying design and levels of skill. Some of the designs were very personal while others were much more standardised:

> The quilt made for the Australian soldiers and the quilt made for the British soldiers have other motifs besides a few squares with flowers on them. The women embroidered patriotic images, such as the British flag, 'V' for victory signs, St George slaying the dragon, and Drake at his bowls.[18]

The wife of an Australian Medical officer, Colonel R.M. Webster, donated the quilt for the Japanese soldiers to the Australian War Memorial, and the Australian quilt is on permanent loan from the Red Cross. The quilts represent an important part of Australian military history – the forbearance and ingenuity of a group of women, mostly of British or European stock, in the face of brutality and hardship. The quilts represent a group enterprise by very different personalities under very difficult circumstances. While quilts are normally associated with comfort in the home these quilts were intended as a means

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[15] Wendy Dodd, Senior Textile Conservator, Australian War Memorial, personal communication, 1998
[16] M. Rolfe, op. cit., p.76.
[17] J. Peek, unpublished notes prepared for the Military Heraldry Section of the Australian War Memorial.
[18] M. Rolfe, op. cit., p.76.

of communication – to comfort by providing evidence that loved ones were alive. 'There is no evidence that they were ever really intended for or used by the wounded.'[19]

Textile Texts

In my research of Australian historical textile I am indebted to other authors who have produced studies of textile in Australia. These authors, just like the museums, have their own means of classifying artefacts and information. A text upon which I have relied heavily, is *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book*, described on the title page as a study of '500 works by 500 Australian Women Artists from Colonial Times to 1955', edited by Joan Kerr. This study was prompted by the twentieth anniversary of International Women's Year. Whilst it is more specifically about women working in the fine arts, the editor operates under the premise that art should not be narrowly prescriptive and confined to the gallery wall but should be seen 'in a wider, more relevant, less prejudicial context'[20]. The text is especially useful as it serves to locate textile within an art, rather than a strictly historical, context. Of particular interest is the information provided about the lives of the women who produced the work.

Significant, too, are Margaret Rolfe's *Patchwork Quilts in Australia* and Jennifer Isaacs' *The Gentle Arts* in which Isaacs examines in some detail two hundred years of domestic and decorative art by Australian women. All of these texts have rather different purposes but the authors share a common delight and interest in discussing work made by women, which they feel should take its rightfully valued place within the history of Australia. Isaacs, for instance, makes the point that 'most Australian histories have shown little real examination of women's role within the family'[21]. She is undoubtedly influenced by Anne Summers' beliefs, whose text she quotes. Isaacs suggests that even feminist writing has concentrated on political history in terms of the educational and legal spheres. Isaacs' book specifically surveys the work of women in their domestic spaces in the hope that they 'might take their place as important and valuable components of the social and

[19] ibid., p.76.
[20] J. Kerr, op cit., Introduction, p.vi.
[21] J. Isaacs, op. cit., p.7.

creative history of Australia'[22]. The book is important as part of a process of contemporary historical writing that aims to reveal and ascribe influence to those parts of society that were previously dismissed as insignificant.

Margaret Rolfe's book contains much of interest regarding the historical and social settings surrounding the production of the quilts she discusses. In a chapter entitled 'An outpost of Her Majesty's empire: Two appliquéd and embroidered quilts', Rolfe writes of the celebrations surrounding Queen Victoria's fiftieth year as monarch:

> ...Australians celebrated with banners in the streets of the capital cities. Most, although not all, Australians were proud to be part of the Empire, and proud of their British heritage. In 1888 the Centennial of the founding of Australia was celebrated, and it was rather a celebration of the furtherance of the British Empire than the establishment of any new nation. The Centennial was commemorated through the erection of statues, such as the one of Queen Victoria near Hyde Park, Sydney. Not everyone, however, was so enthusiastic. Henry Lawson lamented that Australian children were more likely to be able to recite the names of English sovereigns than to locate Port Phillip.[23]

Apart from the specific mention of banners as part of the celebrations these observations are interesting because they reveal that, in the late nineteenth century, a sense of Australian nationalism, although about to grow dramatically with the Federation of the colonies, was in its infancy.

Rolfe draws attention to the existence of two quilts, made in Tasmania in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century, which reveal common attitudes to the Empire and which she describes as 'unique responses by talented women to their environment and times'[24]. Both have uncertain provenance. One is a large medallion quilt, in the centre of which is a coronet of the Prince of Wales feathers design, surrounded by a myriad of motifs, including flags of the Australian colonies and British Empire and flags denoting

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[22] ibid, pp.6–7: 'The search began with a widely publicised notice in country newspapers and city municipal papers notifying women that the Australian Bicentenary provided an occasion on which to research and publish a pictorial account of the handwork of Australian women'.
[23] M. Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*, Greenhouse Publications, 1987, p.73. Lawson made a significant contribution to raising Australian nationalist debate in the late nineteenth century.

English military victories at Waterloo. It is now held in the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart. The second quilt is the well-known Westbury Quilt, which has a central panel depicting an embroidered Queen Victoria with heraldic devices. Surrounding her are many delightfully embroidered scenes of daily life emblazoned with phrases expressing 'patriotic fervour for the Empire' and those containing 'morals and exhortations for good and Christian behaviour'[25]. It appears to have been made between 1900 and 1903 by a woman or women who lived in Westbury, Tasmania. Both quilts support and celebrate visually the existing social and political arrangements of an earlier Australian society. In circumstances when literacy is not universal such visual statements have an exponentially increased impact.

Nonetheless an increasing propensity on the part of Australians to celebrate their own distinctive national character, as foreshadowed by Henry Lawson's concerns, found expression in many social and artistic spheres, not least the textile arts. A number of art works that attest to such concerns are discussed in Kerr's study,[26], which aims to illustrate that women in a wide range of artistic mediums have, from colonial times, made a substantial and significant contribution to the visual arts within Australia. Kerr organises the artistic achievements of women within parameters that are wide ranging and that include chapters with titles such as 'Happy families', 'Learning and earning', 'War work' and 'Nationalism and heritage'. Kerr's study emphasises that, in contravention of the popular public/private dichotomy, many of these subjects were as much a concern for female as for male artists. Her book contains much of interest about the lives and social involvement of the women concerned, not all of whom, perhaps, would have classed themselves as artists. For my purposes it will be useful to organise these women and their work into three categories: embroiderers and lace makers; textile designers; and designers and makers of ceremonial and religious textile pieces.

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[24] ibid., p.73.
[25] ibid., p.75.
[26] J. Kerr, op. cit.

Embroiderers and Lace Makers

In chapter one I discussed the influential work of Rozsika Parker who argued, as a result of her research, that the Renaissance saw the emergence of an ideology and a conceptual framework that identified embroidery with women working in an unpaid capacity at home:

> 'the characterisation of needlework has been part of a political enterprise in terms of its association with an ideal femininity. This femininity was based upon 'docility, obedience, love of home, and a life without work – it showed the embroiderer to be a deserving, worthy wife and mother' whose proper and natural place was the private domain of domesticity.'[27]

However, as we shall see, the truth is not quite so straightforward. While many women certainly did engage in embroidery and other needlework practices the reality of their existence was at some remove from this ideal femininity which saw them leading a leisured and unproblematic life.

One family of dedicated *professional* needlewomen were the I'Anson ladies, Jessie Rebecca and her daughters Rebecca Maria and Jessie Cowley I'Anson, who used their fine needlework skills as a means of financial support. Mrs I'Anson (b.1862 – d.1958) designed all the lace and needlework patterns used by herself and her daughters. One particular design is based upon the Sturt's Desert Pea flower. This botanical specimen had been discovered by Mrs I'Anson's uncle, Joseph Crowley, who was:

> ...a member of Charles Sturt's expedition of 1844–46. The flower was subsequently adopted as the floral emblem of South Australia (although not officially proclaimed until 1961), naturally a source of great pride to the family.[28]

Her design was used in a number of items 'but among those of which she was especially proud was a needlepoint lace doily she made in memory of her uncle [...] In 1951 her

[27] See chapter one in this thesis.
[28] ibid., pp.377–378.

daughters presented it to the Sturt Museum, Cheltenham, England'[29]. This family of needlewomen supported themselves financially with their skills. They also contrived in a 'humble' private domestic artefact to pay tribute to a noted and publicly heralded male explorer.[30]

Other early Australian textile and needleworkers were to become engaged in actively promoting their craft. Elinor Robey was born in Hobart in 1885 into a prominent Tasmanian Quaker family. She studied design and craft with Lucien Dechaineux at the Hobart Technical College, as well as needlework at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland. Dechaineux was a leader in the Arts and Crafts Society of Tasmania, and Robey's work reveals the Society's influence:

> The movement in Australia was characterised, not only by concern for fine craftsmanship and authentic regional materials, but by the use of native floral motifs, expressing a desire for decoration appropriate to the use and locality of the object created.[31]

Examples of Elinor Robey's fine embroidery are held in the National Gallery of Australia. One of them is a handkerchief sachet of cream linen with a botanical design of *Kennedyia prostrata* worked mainly in satin stitch. As a simple domestic artefact, it belongs in the realm of Karskens' "'myriad vivid glimpses...of people *doing things*", actions and gestures, whether small or informal, or ritualised and public [whereby] Rocks people begin to emerge as human beings'[32]. As such, it signifies a growing interest in working with specifically Australian images. This interest echoes a growing social and political transformation that flowered through the period of Federation and its aftermath, and which in the late twentieth century resulted in the debate and referendum on the question of Australia becoming a republic.

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[29] ibid., pp.126–127.
[30] ibid. Kerr also notes that a similarly embroidered tribute to a noted explorer is a map sampler attributed to Elizabeth Cook, the wife of Captain James Cook. The work, a silk embroidery now held in the Australian National Maritime Museum, dates from around 1790 and is a chart of the world as navigated by Cook, decorated in each corner with a spray of embroidered flowers (p.90).
[31] ibid., p.182.
[32] G. Karskens, op. cit., p.7.

There are plenty of other examples of such apparently simple textile artefacts. Margaret Ann Field, born in Scotland in 1842, who came to Australia with her family at the age of thirteen, is described as a crochet lace maker, embroiderer, painter, writer and amateur astronomer[33]. She married a mining engineer, Edwin Richard Field, a pioneer in surveying and prospecting, whose name is publicly enshrined in the name of the town of Costerfield in Victoria and whose work took him to remote regions of Australia, his wife and children in tow. Margaret seamlessly combined her love of needlework with the study of astronomy to develop, over a forty-five year period, a series of lace-crochet patterns based upon the stars and constellations of the southern skies. She retained a strong loyalty to her British background and indeed returned to England at the age of seventy-five to attend the Slade School of Art. Nonetheless, her willingness to see and record the particularities of the Australian continent in a familiar visual and material form, at a time when Sir Arthur Streeton and other members of the Heidelberg School were developing their avowedly Australian style of painting, is worth noting. Her patterns resonate too with the recurrent use of the Southern Cross constellation in successive flags of significance in Australia – the Anti-Transportation League flag, the Eureka Flag and the current Australian flag.

Field was not alone in her lace-making endeavours. Early in the twentieth century there was a move to establish a lace design school in Hobart.[34] It was hoped that new lace forms would be developed that would be characteristically Tasmanian and lace makers were encouraged to use all forms Tasmanian as their inspiration. A Tasmanian lace exhibition was held in September 1910 in Hobart and, of the 500 lacework exhibits, 109 were inspired by Tasmanian flora and fauna. The winning exhibit was a fine and delicately worked needlerun lace fan made by Ada Grey Wilson.[35] Ada was one of the three daughters of a former premier of Tasmania, Sir James Milne Wilson. She was an active member of Hobart's cultural scene and president of the Tasmanian Lace Exhibition's planning committee, which consisted of nine women and one man, Mr

[33] J. Kerr, op. cit., p.349.
[34] ibid., p.278.
[35] ibid., p.278. In 1912 Ada Grey Wilson emigrated to England but in 1938 she donated her collection of lace and lace designs to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

George Clark. Ada Grey Wilson's prize-winning fan was made according to a design by M.E. (Patty) Mault, called *Kangaroo Apple Kangaroo*, which features the apple and kangaroos of Tasmania surrounded by garlands of apple blossom. Miss Mault was also an exhibition organiser, a keen amateur painter and an accomplished illuminator. Despite the Lace Exhibition Committee's success in attracting entries, the planned lace design school never eventuated in Hobart. Nevertheless such public enterprises and the strong influence of women within them were small steps in the larger project of a developing Australian aesthetic in the fine and applied arts.

All of these examples of women making textiles resonate with references to home and family. Pieces of embroidery and lace, doilies, handkerchiefs and seat covers were made to decorate and civilise hearth and home, places of private comfort. And yet they also play their part in a public sphere, the work exhibited in public spaces, the women making them active in a public arena, playing their own particular part in the development of an Australian aesthetic and a national self-image.

Textile Designers

Textile designers were also turning to Australian flora and fauna for inspiration and to materials such as Australian wool in their products. Women were active in the design and manufacture of printed fabric and the area of textile printing allowed some of these women to venture into a more professional and industrial context. Frances Burke, Lucie Dalgarno, Catherine Hardess and Molly Grove, Ira Forbes Smith, Alexandra MacKenzie and Olive Nock were all involved in both textile design and developing an Australian imagery.

Lucie Dalgarno, born in Sydney in 1874, was, like Jessie Rebecca I'Anson, left a widow with children to support and turned to the textile arts as a means of self-support. She was a painter who had studied with the Royal Art Society and at Julian Ashton's Sydney Art School. She designed, stencilled and embroidered evening dresses for a wholesale business and then began hand painting silk textiles using batik. She was successful in making and selling dress accessories, silk scarves and so on, using Australian flowers as

design motifs. We are told, however, that the French influence on the style of her work was strong and 'her use of the gumnut blossom as a repeat motif transforms the local flower into something exotic, luxurious and modish, in keeping with contemporary European fashions'[36]. The European influence was still marked and it was very much the custom, until well into the twentieth century, for aspiring artists and designers to visit Europe to complete their artistic education and legitimise their practice.

Also born in Sydney, Olive Nock worked in the family hardware business at the same time as developing her artistic skills, studying drawing and china painting. In the mid-1920s she travelled in Europe, visiting Staffordshire potteries and exhibitions at London's Victoria and Albert Museum, after which she returned to Australia, determined to produce pieces using native flora and fauna as design elements. Her deep interest in and knowledge of these is reflected in her membership of the Royal Zoological Society. On her return to Australia she was nominated for membership of the Society of Arts and Crafts and became totally dedicated to the Arts and Crafts Movement 'which offered her the outlet for her creative energy which had been denied her in any professional area'[37]. She worked in a wide range of craft media, china painting and leatherwork as well as embroidery, fabric printing and bookbinding. Notable among her design influences were the Aboriginal bark shields she studied at the Australian Museum and one of her designs won a competition organised by a Sydney fabric retailer and was printed on silk by Liberty's of London. Nock's history illustrates a broad range of activity and interest.

Ira Forbes Smith, Australian designer and artist, was particularly inspired by indigenous culture after consciously rejecting the English subject matter of her early needlework designs. Working in the years around World War II, she used Aboriginal shields and boomerangs as well as the wildflowers of Western Australia as design elements and was also commended in competition. None of her designs were ever printed, apparently because of wartime constraints.

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[36] ibid., pp.148–149.
[37] ibid., p.416.

Nan MacKenzie, Catherine Hardess, Mollie Grove and Frances Burke were all textile designers who established their own textile printing enterprises and were active in the production of Australian-flavoured textiles. MacKenzie had made a study of dyes and established Annan Fabrics with her partner, Annie Outlaw. Their designs became an international success. However, their business eventually foundered in financial trouble. Hardess and Grove spent a lifetime working together in both England and Australia and established a business called 'eclarté' in Melbourne between the wars. They enjoyed considerable success working with linen and fine Australian wool. Architects and interior designers of the time, who were working with an Australian aesthetic, commissioned their work for use in homes and other buildings.[38] Frances Burke is also one of Australia's early successful textile designers and firmly believed in the development of an Australian aesthetic for Australian domestic interiors.[39] She used Aboriginal motifs but shifted the colours from the earth reds and ochres of traditional Aboriginal artwork towards bright blues and greens and dusty pinks. Burke was awarded an MBE in 1970 and an honorary doctorate from RMIT in 1987. All of these women were working in the arts in a very public sense, building a very Australian aesthetic and design identity. Their work is reminiscent of the efforts of Margaret Preston, who as a painter attracted some criticism for her use of Australian, particularly Aboriginal design influences.

Designers and Makers of Ceremonial and Religious Textile Pieces

The church has always utilised the embroiderer's skill. In fact, in Europe in the Middle Ages, religion was the dominant influence on culture and images were made for the glory of God. Artists and craftsmen worked within families and then guilds, and artistic production was a group enterprise. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the form of English religious embroidery known as 'Opus Anglicanum' is thought to have had a

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[38] ibid., p.136.
The Australian National University in Canberra was a focus for Australia's postwar hopes for international recognition and good residential accommodation was considered vital for the outstanding academics it sought to attract [...] University House, designed by [Brian] Lewis, won the Sulman Prize for architecture in 1954 (Lewis) commissioned Fred Ward for 'well-designed' furniture in natural Australian timbers and Ward suggested eclarté upholstery as their most suitable foil [...] Draped over the windows, their curtains filtered the afternoon sun playing on the pools outside and evoked the colours of the Australian bush envisaged in Lewis's plans for the interiors.

[39] ibid., p.323.

higher prestige than any other art form. William Morris, the influential English designer and leader of the English Arts and Crafts Movement in the nineteenth century, was responsible for a resurgence of interest in such work. The women in his family were enthusiastic in their production of church furnishings and vestments to complement the style of the church interior.

At least up until the late twentieth century, the role of women in the church generally has been that of support. In this role, and working under the commonality of group enterprise, they have produced significant amounts of the textile that decorates and clothes both the church and its figures of authority. In England there had been a Ladies' Ecclesiastical Embroidery Society in existence since the 1850s and in the 1880s an interest in such art was brought to Adelaide by a founder of the original Society, a nun who came to St Dominic's Priory in North Adelaide.[40] This influence seems evident in a piece of church embroidery, produced around 1890 and displayed in St Peter's Church in Glenelg, South Australia and reproduced here as the frontispiece to this chapter. *The Guild of Perseverance Banner* was made by a group of craft-workers who had formed the St Paul's Guild. The Guild was under the direction of Elizabeth Ellen Green, wife of the rector of St Peter's Anglican Church, Port Adelaide, during the 1880s. Ellen Green was influenced by Morris and the English Arts and Crafts Movement and was serious about her craft to the extent of dyeing her own embroidery silks. The design of the banner seems very much in keeping with the English style of ecclesiastical embroidery and its religious purpose. The central motif is a chalice and communion wafer superimposed upon a gold satin cross; the colours of white, gold and red are symbolic of purity, splendour and the blood of Christ. Ellen Green was the daughter of a clergyman, she had no children and, we are told, 'shared her husband's controversial High Church views and his interest in introducing 'ritualistic devices' such as processional crosses, altar candlesticks and incense into the then strongly evangelical colony of South Australia'[41].

[40] ibid., p.214.
[41] ibid., p.363.

A further example of early church textile work is a needle painting, *Triple-decker Pulpit in St John's Church of England, Parramatta.* Fifteen-year-old Eliza Staff made this between 1845 and 1847. It is different in style from the Guild of Perseverance Banner and more secular in approach because it commemorates more earthly beings. The pulpit in question is inhabited in the textile by three portraits – those of its first minister, Reverend Samuel Marsden, as well as the Reverend Henry Bobart, Marsden's curate and successor and, finally, John Foreman Staff, parish clerk and father of Eliza. The portraits were painted on silk by a professional painter, William Griffin, and were inserted onto Eliza's meticulously worked background. The piece was probably produced 'to commemorate her father's close association with Marsden [...] and his long and faithful service at St John's. The needle painting remained in the family's possession until the early 1900s and then was donated to the church'[42].

In terms of the trappings of state and government the Steffanoni family is a significant name in Australian textile history. Sarah Ann Steffanoni (neé Reading) was born in England in 1844 and came with her family to Sydney in 1853 under the patronage of her uncle, John Fairfax of the *Sydney Morning Herald.* The family ran an import business specialising in Berlin woolwork, embroidery silks and braids, lampshades and clocks. Sarah Ann married Lewis Steffanoni, a commercial artist and painter of Italian descent, and the business continued under this new partnership:

> Many of the embroidered icons of colonial society were designed and executed at the shop. Each new regiment, yachting club, masonic or ecclesiastical organisation needed its regalia, flags, badges, vestments and trappings embroidered in gold bullion.[43]

Lewis Steffanoni died in 1880 and Sarah Ann moved with her five young children to a house in the Rocks area of Sydney where she continued with the embroidery business and took in lodgers to support her children. Her three daughters helped with the embroidery and she trained many other women. Sarah Ann's daughter Sophie made many of the designs for the family business and one of her embroideries was shown in the Colonial

[42] ibid., p.3.
[43] ibid., p.454.

and Indian Exhibition in London. In 1892 her embroidered Australian Coat of Arms won first prize in an exhibition in Chicago. The family provided the embroidery for the vice-regal tailors, Chorley & Co., a family business for over a hundred years, originally established in Sydney and then in Canberra. Customers of the firm included Lord Carrington, Sir Robert Duff and the Earl of Jersey, who all served in the post of Governor in New South Wales:

> The Chorley records state that there were five classes of civil uniform and that the first class, which included these very formal diplomatic coats, could only be worn by the governors of Canada, Jamaica, New Ceylon, New Zealand, Hong Kong...and all the Australian states. Lower classes had coats with diminishing amounts of bullion embroidery. Another elaborate coat was made for the King of Tonga, and it is possible that more than twenty such coats of various classes were produced by the Chorley and Steffanoni families.[44]

All these historical examples of textile practice are relevant to my purpose for at least two reasons. First, most of these examples support the status quo and form part of the institutional trappings of colonial Australian society. Second, women made most of these pieces and many of the women worked or studied or pursued their interests in a social and political sphere. Their influence should be acknowledged and recognised within Boulding's description of an 'integrative power', which is socially cohesive power and deeply ingrained with notions of legitimacy.[45] As Anne Summers would argue, women, even those whose main sphere of activity was domestic, had an influence on society and culture not fully recognised. Kerr's achievement in her study of these women in the twentieth anniversary of International Women's Year was to make them visible.

However, I have argued earlier that 'textile may also act as the material incorporation of social bodies initially or ultimately characterised as subversive'[46]. It was Foucault's premise that power always carries with it the possibility of subversion, the kind of power that 'needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social

[44] ibid., p.118.
[45] See Chapter Two of this thesis.
[46] ibid., p.39

body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression'[47]. The following chapter considers examples of textile that sometimes have been used in more disruptive ways.

[47] P. Rabinow, op. cit., p.61.

Chapter Five

BANNERS INTO ART

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Marjorie Luck (designer)
***Banner of the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union, Tasmanian Branch*, 1985**

Source: J. Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts*, Lansdowne, Sydney, 1987

Chapter Five

BANNERS INTO ART

There are a number of early examples of textile in Australia's history that have been used to great effect in an expression of profound concern about and questioning of the status quo. Jennifer Isaacs notes that:

> Women have always used their traditional craft skills to aid in community efforts. They have made banners, worked slogans, made commemorative quilts and organised themselves into groups to lend a hand wherever necessary, making works of art around which individuals, groups, communities and even countries could mobilise.[1]

Textile used as a means of mobilising elements of society has often taken the form of flags or banners. One of Australia's most significant and highly regarded pieces of social and political history is the Eureka Flag,[2] made by a group of women, including an immigrant from England, Anastasia Withers.[3] Anastasia arrived with her husband and baby daughter in Melbourne in 1851 and the family went gold digging at Bendigo and Ballarat. Along with other miners' wives, she was responsible for sewing the flag, which flew over the Eureka Stockade during a miners' uprising in 1854. The design of the flag is attributed to a Canadian digger named Ross, who died from wounds received during the fighting. The flag is of fine blue woollen fabric with a white cross of cotton twill centred over the blue background. Each arm of the cross bears a star made from cotton lawn with another star centred on the cross – five stars in all, thus symbolising the

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[1] J. Isaacs, op. cit., p.182.

[2] The flag is now in the collection of the City of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. The Gallery brochure contains the following information:

> The Ballarat Fine Art Gallery Council has been the custodian of the Eureka Flag since November 1895, when the Gallery's founder and president, James Oddie, received it from the widow of John King, a trooper who took part in the attack on the Eureka Stockade. The flag is Australia's most important historical relic whose brief glory from 29th November to 3rd December 1854 was a significant part of Australia's history. The Eureka flag is displayed in its own gallery...

Southern Cross. The miners lost a short but bloody battle and the Eureka Flag was torn down by a trooper, John King, and badly damaged as pieces were ripped off as souvenirs. Anastasia's family had to flee the goldfield and thirteen of the rebel miners were taken to stand trial in Melbourne. However, it seems that no jury would convict them. Indeed many of their demands were eventually met and their leader, Peter Lalor, was elected to Parliament. This event is significant for Australian unionism as representing the fight for the rights and liberties of working people. It is a momentous occasion in Australia's social and public history in which women played a supportive but nevertheless societally defining role. I discussed earlier the significance of flags as symbols: 'Man does not live by symbols alone, but man orders and interprets his reality by his symbols, and even reconstructs it.'[4] It is important to recognise the role that women have played in this construction/reconstruction. A tattered, though carefully restored, piece of textile symbolises the struggle by both men and women in pursuit of their ideals of social equity.

A less well-known but still significant banner in the history of Australian politics is that designed by Dora Meeson Coates, a painter born in Melbourne in 1869, who moved to live in London and became very actively involved in women's suffrage. She was married to the painter, George Coates and her own artwork fell into a social-realist genre as she attempted to reveal the difficulties of working life and the problems of the underprivileged classes, particularly women. The banner, in which the image is painted rather than embroidered, bears the motto, COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA: 'TRUST THE WOMEN, MOTHER, AS I HAVE DONE.' It was first carried in the Suffrage Procession in London in 1908, as part of the campaign for women's rights in Britain. Over ten thousand marchers paraded before crowds of up to half a million people. Australia had already afforded its white female citizens the vote. Meeson used the example of her native Australia as a symbol of enlightenment in her banner which depicts:

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[3] J. Kerr, op. cit., p. 270. Kerr tells us that the woman responsible for the flag's restoration, Val D'Angri, made the discovery some years after her work that Anastasia Withers, her great-great grandmother, was one of the flag's makers.

[4] R. Firth, *Symbols Public and Private*, Symbol, Myth and Ritual series, ed. V. Turner, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1973, p20.

> ... a young woman symbolic of Australia appealing to the older Britannia, urging Britain to grant suffrage as it had been granted throughout Australia in 1902 and to New Zealand in 1893. Meeson's [...] banner emphasised the enlightened attitudes of the young nation in contrast to the mother country's inflexibility and thus represented one nation's appeal to another at a level of statesmanship [...] By her use of the symbolic figures Australia and Britannia she was attempting to redefine the issue from one of internal politics to one of international significance.[5]

Meeson's banner was an attempt to symbolise all women, not just those belonging to specific organisations or professional bodies. Although it originated overseas, it represents a small but significant episode in Australia's social history on the world's political stage. The Bicentennial Authority purchased Coates' banner as a gift to the women of Australia and it now hangs in the new Parliament House in Canberra.[6]

Trade Union Banners

> Within the Australian labour movement, the function and history of banners is inextricably linked with the celebration of the achievement of the eight hour day, first won by stonemasons and other building tradesmen in Melbourne and Sydney during 1856. For nearly eighty years, from 1857 to the Great Depression, Eight Hour Day was the major festival in the Australian trade union calendar. It not only celebrated the demarcation of daily routine into eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest but also asserted the dignity and worth of labour, additionally offering public evidence of the claims of the union movement to social integration and respectability.[7]
>
> Andrew Reeves

The trade union banner has a long record in the history of subversion within social and economic structures. In his study of trade union banners, Andrew Reeves writes of seeing many photographs, often depicting Eight Hour Day parades, in which unionists were posed in front of their banners. Reeves argues that the form of the photographs 'was obvious testimony to the importance that unionists had attached to their banners in

[5] Kerr, op. cit., p.220.
[6] ibid., pp.219–220.

previous generations'[8]. Dozens of such banners were lost. Only in New South Wales did any significant number survive and this partly because from 1903 a banner room was maintained in the Trades Hall building in Goulburn Street for nearly seventy years:

> Each union paid an annual fee of £1.0.0 to store their banner on a pulley system protected by calico drops. It was here that the banner maker Edgar Whitbread was employed by a number of unions to refurbish annually banners three months prior to the march, until his death in 1958.[9]

This arrangement, however, came to an end in 1972 and only the dedicated efforts of some enthusiasts saved the banners from loss. The unions themselves seemed to have lost interest, perhaps as a result of the declining fortunes of the union movement but also largely due to the decline of Eight Hour Day as a major celebration in Australian life. Although banners played a varied role in British trade union life, within Australia their use seems to have been exclusively related to Eight Hour Day processions. These were of huge importance in nineteenth-century Australian working life, 'demonstrating the extent of working-class organisation and its commitment to a progressive social consensus'[10].

The banners used in Australia were heavily influenced by their British counterparts. This was natural enough when the union movement here, consisting largely of immigrant workers and their descendants, sustained the beliefs of its parent organisation. Gradually, however, individual Australian banners makers developed their own local and distinct styles, whilst also developing the use of Australian flora and fauna, as well as incorporating the varying coats of arms of the Australian States. Designs were the subject of much discussion; a banner was a significant financial commitment, often a public demonstration of financial stability and substantial and effective organisation so that the

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[7] A. Stephen & A. Reeves, op. cit., p.1.
[8] ibid., introduction.
[9] ibid., introduction.
[10] ibid., p.8. Reeves argues that the situation is changing, and that some unions such as the Sydney branch of the Painters and Dockers Union have restored and begun using their banner again.

'unfurling of a new banner developed as an important ritual'[11] during which tales of past history were told and progress and future ideals recorded.

Many of the banners were of immense proportions, perhaps up to five by 6 metres, and consisted of rich imagery and symbolism, painted on either silk or, more popularly, canvas, sometimes embellished with ornate fringes. In Britain there were specialist banner-makers such as Tutills of London,[12] whose studio monopolised the market and who also supplied the occasional Australian union. In Australia, banners were usually painted by signwriters or artists such as New Zealander, John Salvana, who had trained at the Royal Art School Society in Sydney and who undertook banner painting commissions in addition to his landscape painting. These banners, apart from the sewn elements, seem to have mainly been the work of men. However, the original Melbourne Eight Hour Day banner, bearing the slogan, '8 HOURS LABOUR, 8 HOURS RECREATION, 8 HOURS REST', and made in 1856, was the work of Eight Hour Committee President Thomas Vine and his three daughters.[13]

Contemporary Developments

More recently, there has been a revival of interest in banner production, linked to a re-evaluation within trade union ranks of the role of culture and the arts within the labour movement. In 1980 the ACTU Congress:

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[11] ibid., p.5. 'Prominent unionists and, later, Labor politicians were sure to be invited and often such a guest dedicated the banner.'

[12] V. Rigney, *The Contemporary Art of Banner Making*, Glasgow Museum, 1992:
Tutills of London, established in 1837 and operating at its peak in the 1890s, offered a complete service to trade unions from weaving the silk, developing the design, painting and even making the poles and ribbons to support the banner. George Tutill developed a patent process of applying India rubber to the surface of the silk to provide a more stable surface for the intricate paintwork. His staff included specialists who painted heads, hands, scrolls and people at work. Union committees would pick their individual design elements from a catalogue and although Tutill claimed that no two banners were the same, they all employed the regalia, heraldic and artistic imagery of contemporary late 19th century story paintings.

[13] A. Stephen & A. Reeves, op. cit., p.25.

> ...adopted an Arts and Creative Recreation Policy which rejected the idea 'that unions have a strictly limited role to play in society' and instead stressed the importance of encouraging art practices [...] 'that depict the trade unions' contribution to Australian life.'[14]

This development is linked with a 1982 initiative in which the Australia Council accepted a program, entitled 'Art and Working Life', that aimed to radically restructure union involvement in and collaboration with the arts. Artists are now funded to work with unions, collaborating with workers and their families to produce a diversity of cultural forms that acknowledge working class traditions and concerns and include parades, performances, creative writing and photography, as well as murals and banners.[15] According to Reeves, almost thirty banners have been commissioned under this scheme, some of which seem to be a good deal more militant in approach. They publicise issues of concern to their members such as health and safety issues and employment concerns.[16] One banner, unusual because it is embroidered rather than painted, is that of the New South Wales branch of Actors' Equity, which serves as a focal point for a diverse and widely scattered union membership. A graphic artist, Michael Fitzjames, produced the design and a textile artist, Nola Taylor, embroidered it in fabric:

> In the words of Actors' Equity's New South Wales secretary, Michael Crosby, the union wanted a banner that would be comparable in 'quality to an art work, as performing artists constitute an artistically educated (and highly critical) group of workers'...[17]

The banner was paraded during the April Peace March in Sydney in 1984.

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[14] 'The Arts and Creative Recreation Policy', ACTU Melbourne, 1980, cited in A. Stephens & A. Reeves, op. cit., p.42.

[15] Creative Alliances: Unions and the Arts, p.2. [This is a trade union publication, date unknown.] 'Artist Megan Evans was employed for several years as Director of the Victorian Trades Hall Arts Workshop, producing commissioned banners for unions as well as a series of paintings for the Victorian Remand Centre.'
Megan Evans also visited Scotland with the assistance of unions, the Australia Council and Qantas Airlines, for the exhibition *The Contemporary Art of Banner Making* which is discussed later in this chapter.

[16] A. Stephen & A. Reeves, op. cit., p.43:
> More than thirty years ago Wollongong miners marched on Sydney with banners drawing attention to the health hazards associated with coal dust and working conditions. In 1982 their new banner became a rallying point for the South Coast miners' struggle against retrenchments when they marched on Federal parliament during the Kemira mine stay-in. Media coverage of these demonstrations repeatedly focused on the banner as a readily identifiable and eminently graphic image.

[17] Ibid., p.44.

Interestingly, a number of the more contemporary banners seem to have been made by women and what Reeves calls 'artworkers politicised over the last decade'[18] rather than painting and signwriting firms. Artists have to negotiate with union members and workers to represent their interests and issues in collaborative and mutually satisfying ways. In the early 1980s the Workers' Cultural Action Committee of Newcastle, with the aid of a grant from the Community Arts Board, initiated a Trade Union Banner project. Artist Birgitte Hansen was commissioned to make banners for five local unions, to be used in May Day parades and displayed in union offices. The unions were offering financial, technical and logistical assistance and were to retain the right to make all final decisions 'regarding the design, layout, models, colour and written information on the banners':

> New banners will help provide the local trade union movement with a positive identification for their members and the public regarding their contemporary issues and concerns. The morale of the local workforce, not to mention unemployed people, is low. Newcastle workers are threatened by retrenchments here on an unprecedented scale [...] The restructuring and partial closure of the steel industry has severe repercussions for the whole community, not just those workers and their families who have been retrenched. The unions are anxious to communicate to the community and people elsewhere the adverse effect of such critical industrial change in the Hunter.[19]

Jennifer Isaacs also describes the involvement of a woman in the design and construction of a banner for the Federated Miscellaneous Workers' Union, Tasmanian Branch. Textile artist Marjorie Luck was commissioned to undertake the project in 1985. Luck involved members of the union in the development of the design. Eleven women, all of whom had input into the resolution of the completed work, constructed the banner, a 1.8 by 1.5 metre canvas tapestry. Isaacs points out that although women had long been involved in the manufacture of such work, only rarely had a woman actually designed such a banner.[20] The involvement of the members throughout the process built on the notion of community and community ideals, and the integration of people in a common identity

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[18] ibid., p.44.

[19] CAPER 19, Community Arts Board, c.1983, p.8. CAPER is an occasional publication of the Community Arts Board on community arts activities in Australia.

and a common purpose. The process and the finished textile piece embody these principles.

Banners as Art

The kind of approach that has led to a revival of banner making has also led to a divergence from earlier formats that tended to be more formulaic towards 'a self-confident artistic expression of trades unions over the past seven years [which] has been led by the Australian unions'[21]. In 1992 an exhibition of banners from around the world was held in Glasgow, Scotland. Australian banners featured significantly in the exhibition, some of these showing an increased use of embroidery and other 'traditional' women's skills, such as the Women in Trade Unions banner made by Kay Lawrence and Elaine Gardner in 1987. A similar style of banner, also displayed in the 1992 exhibition, is the Piper Alpha Banner of Condolence, made by Australian artist, Julie Montgarret. The Victorian Trades and Labour Council had sent this banner in 1989 to the City of Aberdeen and the families of men lost in an oilrig disaster off the Scottish coast:

> The Piper Alpha Banner of Condolence demonstrates the symbolic power of a banner to convey much more than protest or identification. The banner [...] now hangs in the hall of remembrance at Aberdeen City Art Gallery. Occasionally wreaths of flowers are found placed beneath it. It was sent with a message calling on all governments to implement the strictest safety codes for offshore oil and gas installations, recognising that this work is carried out in a hostile and wild environment. Each grid of watery opaque fabric carries the name of an individual who died in the tragedy.[22]

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, Virginia Rigney undertook some analysis of the type and development of such pieces, not only as social comment but also as an examination of their artistic stature. It is obvious that the Art and Working Life program in Australia, with its emphasis on collaboration and the addressing of personal concerns, has been influential in the development of greater freedom of expression. The purposes for which banners are made, whilst built upon trade union traditions, have developed to

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[20] J. Isaacs, op. cit., pp.184–185.
[21] V. Rigney, op. cit.
[22] ibid.

reflect a more complex community with many issues to address. The exhibition also included the UK Names Project banner produced in response to the Aids virus[23], banners about issues that are specifically identified with women, such as the Greenham Common Peace Camp,[24] as well as banners from South Korea inspired by the nationalist cause of the reunification of South Korea with its northern counterpart. In addition to considering the inherent aesthetics of the form, the exhibition served to confirm the world-wide acceptance of the banner as a means of identification and communication, a method of establishing connections between varied groups of people. The catalogue contains a telling statement made by a student from a South London school, one of a group of children who, by making a banner of support, had established a link with families in Guatemala that had suffered from political repression and human rights abuses:

> While planning the banner we had to be careful as we didn't want to offend them by what was put on it...We were going to do a flag of Guatemala but this may have offended them as it stands more for the government than for the people. So we decided not to do any flags.[25]

Rigney comments that the only point of contact between banner and flag is that they are both made of cloth in order to make a bold visual statement. I disagree. A banner, despite the political persuasion of its makers, builds upon the history of the flag form by seeking to influence and unite a group of people into a sympathetic whole. Individual banner makers may revolt against the nationalist sentiment represented by national flags but they understand the underlying power of the flag form.

In Adelaide, South Australia, in 1982, an organising committee presented a women's national art show called *Quantum Leaps*. It formed part of a 'herstory' of the Women's Art Movement in South Australia. A number of visual arts and performing art events were staged, amongst them 'Quantum Leaps, Wimmins Flags'. A total of ten flags flew on the streets of Adelaide, eight in King William Street and two in the Festival Plaza.

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[23] Chapter Two of this thesis.
[24] A long-running anti-nuclear protest in the south of England.
[25] V. Rigney, op. cit.

They had titles like 'Menses', 'Dancing Sneakers', 'Earth Spirits'. The women artists who made them issued various statements such as:

> This flag makes a comment about the oppression of women through shoes. We used fabric and material paint. The inspiration came from how Myers sells crippling shoes to women. (Chloe Coffrey, Merran Sykes)
>
> Flags are potentially a good form of communication in that they are very public. (Kate Millington)
>
> High-flying movement, colour, light – flags have an amazing vitality and beauty separated from their usual nationalistic function. I wanted to associate mine with some feeling the actual physical flag generates in me. I love to watch them and I hate nationalism so it's good to reclaim them for our own purposes as women. (Chia, about her flag 'Woman Licking Woman')[26]

It seems obvious that the kinds of banner imagery that have evolved may vary according to political purpose and may be less reliant upon conventional symbolism but the underlying motivations for making and using them remain constant. In the context of my argument these banners relate strongly to Boulding's analysis of the positive nature of power - its integrative function. They make visible and unite sections of society in a public and political arena. They identify those who belong within a group and they emphasise the fact that there is a group of which it is possible to be part. In Foucault's terms, describing power as a productive network, they operate as a 'technique of power' in that they embody a common ethos and encourage a positive complicity in action. Foucault argued: 'As an object and instrument of this productive power, men in public spaces, for example, need no coercion: their ethos [manner of being] becomes co-extensive with the body politic and they take their roles to heart.'[27] At the same time these banners embody the ever and increasingly overt presence and influence of women, who have regularly been involved in the making of such 'techniques of power.' These textile pieces have utilised the traditional skills of women in the area of textile technique and

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[26] Women's Art Movement, *Setting the Pace. The Women's Art Movement 1980–1983*, The Women's Art Movement, Adelaide, 1984, p.55.
[27] See chapter three in this thesis.

practice but increasingly their involvement has become publicly acknowledged as that of a professional artist, often working collaboratively, far removed from the notion of a genteel and feminine individual confined to domesticity. By their work in this medium the women involved reflect the always significant but usually invisible and unrecognised impact that women through the years have had on the development of our social and political community.

I have moved now into the realms of the contemporary artist and the textile medium. The next chapter will discuss contemporary textile art practice and examine the work of some of the artists who have had influence upon it.

Chapter Six

Textile as Art and the Craft of Critical Debate

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Kathy Temin
***Corner Wall Drawings*, 1993**

Source: *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Australian Textile Art,* exhibition catalogue, University of Wollongong, 1995

Chapter Six

TEXTILE AS ART AND THE CRAFT OF CRITICAL DEBATE

In the introduction to this thesis I discussed the binary oppositional nature of much of Western philosophy. The oppositions of male/female, public/private, nature/reason and so on have structured the conceptual frameworks within which Western society has viewed its development. These binary oppositions have impacted upon textile in relation to the oppositional terms of art and craft. Art is related to reason and the intellect whereas textile, related as it has traditionally been to the feminine in society, has been relegated to the realm of craft, associated with the derivative and the decorative. This chapter considers textile as artform rather than artefact, addresses the art/craft debate and explores the discourse of Australian contemporary textile art and its influences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Just as museums collect and classify our social heritage so have art galleries played a significant role in delineating the art world. Their contribution is further discussed.

Influences on Australian Textile-related Art

The Australian contemporary textile art scene has been subject to a great deal of influence from overseas. John Corbett is a significant Australian textile artist and teacher who has written of the influences upon contemporary Australian textile art in the years since the 1960s. He mentions the influx of ethnic immigrants, bringing with them their traditional skills and teaching them to Australian women in both rural and urban areas. Corbett acknowledges their influence but at the same time singles out for particular mention those artists who have pushed the traditional into a new realm.

> Those working in studio textiles during the 1960s drew from other cultures (generally exotic) and philosophies for inspiration. Australian Aboriginal culture was observed and

its art reinterpreted, as were the art forms of Asian cultures and the ancient people of the Americas.[1]

Corbett specifically mentions Ann Greenwood[2] (a weaver of large-scale forms), Prue Medlin[3] (later La Motte, weaver), Polish artist, Ewa Pachucka[4] (crocheted three-dimensional forms) and especially the influence of Magdalena Abakanowicz whose exciting work was exhibited in Australia in 1976 at the Art Gallery of NSW, where Corbett assisted her.[5] The sculptural work she exhibited then was based on the human body, consisting of rough elements of male seated figures and huge 'heads' constructed from rope, sisal thread, old jute sacks and glue:

> Concerned with constructing reliefs and creating different arrangements in space, she has completely revolutionised the European tradition of weaving [...] She prepares and dyes the raw materials herself. Then she works on a simple wooden frame without any

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[1] J. Corbett, 'Introduction to the Fibre/Textiles Collection' *Victorian State Craft Collection.* All Corbett's quotes from this source. See also G. Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, NSW, 1992, p.102.

[2] See A. Hersey, 'Ann Greenwood', *Craft Australia*, Summer 1978, vol. 4, p.27. Hersey quotes Greenwood thus:

> My work became more expressive. I have no graphic skills but I became increasingly interested in symbols, particularly those relating to the unconscious...My work is no longer decorative. It is not even comfortable. I seem to be leaning towards subconscious direction. I try to weave moments of living, emotional experiences and fears into my work. Sometimes I get so close to it that I am almost afraid of what I am making.

Hersey writes: 'Some of this fascination with symbols has come to [Greenwood] through her involvement with Peru. She has visited this country several times and feels spiritually very much at home there.'

[3] G. Cochrane, op. cit., p.172:

> La Motte set up the weaving workshop at the Jam Factory in Adelaide in 1976, became very much involved with the Craft Association, particularly the early years of the Tatachilla Summer School and the community weaving events in Victoria in the early 1970s.

[4] G. Cochrane, op. cit., p.172:

> Ewa Pachuka [...] arrived in Sydney in 1971 from Poland, where she had studied graphics at the Lublin Art College and the Lodz Academy of Fine Art, coming from a similar background of Expressionist sculpture and folk art as Magdalena Abakanowicz. Working in crocheted three-dimensional forms in varieties of rope, she had exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and in London and Europe before coming to Australia.

See also the exhibition catalogue for *Recent Australian Art,* Art Gallery of New South Wales, 18 October–18 November 1973. Frances McCarthy and Daniel Thomas write:

> The new art included here is typical of its time in its attempt to show us the reality of the world, often in ephemeral installations of humble materials made especially for this exhibition. It is an art which proposes that all objects can be experienced as art, and that all people can, to some extent, be artists; it is an art which dislikes the idea of the artist-as-genius or freak, of art as a precious object or expensive capitalist commodity. It is probably, like all ambitious art, impossible, but it is an art which would like to destroy the distinction between art and life.

[5] G. Cochrane, op. cit., p.218.

additional attachments. 'I construct the forms by sewing the fabric together. They are stretched on a metal easel. A plaster cast of a man is used for making human forms.'[6]

During the 1970s other influences from Europe and America included artists such as Sheila Hicks, Lenore Tawney and Peter and Ritzi Jacobi, who all worked freely with fibre on a huge scale. All of these artists were weavers and all concerned themselves with spatial interaction and three-dimensionality. The Jacobis created enormous walls of woven cloth reminiscent of large Byzantine tapestries and Middle Eastern tents.[7] When Sheila Hicks worked in Sydney in the early 1980s to create an installation in an Australian gallery she 'sat on the floor for four hours contemplating the space. Formerly it had been the Flying Angel Mission to Seamen Chapel'[8]. She and her fellow artists worked with piles of disused textile scrounged from various institutions. Hicks' philosophy was to work with fabrics 'that have seen action, that have the "patina of life" on them, that have been part of the social history of a community'. So it was that 'a prime ingredient of this tangled collection (of disused textile) was endless metres of used roller towelling which is so much a feature of public washrooms around Australia'. The towelling and other materials were draped and folded to create a sort of shrine or altar 'appropriate to the Gallery's former life as a chapel'. Heather Dorrough, an Australian artist working with Hicks on this installation, is quoted as saying:

I did not agree with all her points of view but she made you question yourself; she was a catalyst in making you question your own validity as an artist. Also, she provided the

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[6] *Craft Australia*, 1976, vol. 6/1, p.25–27 'Magdalena Abakanowicz'.

[7] A. Hersey, 'Ritzi and Peter Jacobi', *Craft Australia*, Winter, vol. 2, 1981, p.28–31. Hersey writes: In 1972, after exploring many two and three dimensional subjects including the use of everyday objects within the tapestry (such as the wardrobe they exhibited in the Lausanne Bienniale in 1971), the Jacobis wove the first of several tapestries, all called 'Transilvania'. Large tapestries showing black winding strands, chaotic groups of tasselations and integrating for the first time large drawings on soft transparent rice paper, the 'Transilvania' series continued over the next few years. These huge tapestries with their multiplicity of contrast and ground relief are like curtains to imaginary places, mystical and inexplicable.

[8] Joyce Burnard, 'Sheila Hicks in Australia', *Craft Australia*, Spring, vol. 3, 1982, p.49–56. All the following quotes about Sheila Hicks' installation are from this source. Burnard writes: The visit to Sydney earlier this year of Sheila Hicks, the internationally known fibre artist, was an important event which will have lasting influence. During the week she was here she set up a textile installation in the Crafts Council Centre Gallery at The Rocks, assisted by several established artists who had been invited to participate. It will be through these professional artists, who had close daily contact with Sheila and her working methods, that her influence will be certain to permeate through the fibre art cultural world.' The artists included Jeannie Baker, Heather Dorrough, Diedre Dowman, Alison Craig, Robyn Gordon, Janet Lawrence, Carolyn Osterhaus, Sue Trytell, Jutta Feddersen, Phillipa Raft, Morley Gringer, Liz Jeneid and visiting American fibre artist, Douglas Fuchs.

> opportunity for the participating artists to have discussions amongst themselves, which I think will have lasting effects [...] I think something, in some way, will grow from that week.[9]

The large-scale human quality of the work of all these artists is notable and removes their work from the traditional craft-based perspective. Since they have worked extensively within the installation mode, their lasting influence has perhaps been to encourage more visual artists to use textile as a medium of expression, in addition to exerting specific influence upon those artists who use textile as a medium of first choice. Such artists have recognised and utilised the qualities of textile in relation to texture, mutability of form and variability of scale as well as its capacity to evoke and recreate sensations, memories and associations.

Significantly not all the artists have been female. Both Corbett and curator and writer Grace Cochrane mention two male textile artists of significance who, because of their gender and their material philosophy, brought a distinctive cast to the Australia contemporary textile art world of the 1970s. One is the embroiderer, David Green, whom Grace Cochrane describes as follows:

> The visit of David Green (b.1940), a lecturer in embroidery and textiles at Goldsmith's College in London, to run embroidery workshops throughout Australia in 1976, stimulated interest in creative embroidery, not only through his eclectic use of padding, quilting, odd materials, wire-netting and paint, but also because he was a man, which made many people think again about the status of embroidery. 'What is a stitch? [...] it can be a rolled steel joist in a concrete slab. It doesn't have to be relevant to a lazy daisy. In fact if you look at it realistically, a stitch is the only tool that is not available to the painter or sculptor. It is something that belongs to the fine art of embroidery.'[10]

The other is Michael Brennand-Wood, a regular visitor from the UK who was still working and teaching periodically in Australia in the late 1990s. Corbett describes him as '(one of those influences which are constantly producing changes and innovations in

[9] ibid., p.52.
[10] G. Cochrane, op. cit., p.220.

Australian studio fibre arts.)...His piece is a good one to use as an example of where the textile/fibre arts have arrived – a work with its roots in traditional embroidery but demonstrating a new merging of the arts'[11]. The influence of all these artists made the confinement of textile practice to the realm of craft an increasingly contentious issue.

The Role of Art Galleries

Having traced some of the earlier influences on the development of textile as artform in Australia, I wanted to continue by considering the current situation. Which artists in Australia currently use textile or have been specifically associated with its development as an art rather than a craft medium? One way to identify them was to look at art gallery collections to see who has been collected in recent years and for what reason. I wanted to discover how galleries classify textile and how their decisions affect the discourse of contemporary textile art.

When contacting galleries I requested information about textile in their collections or exhibition programs that dated from the last quarter of the twentieth century. The information I received often indicated a strong general classification of textile as associated with the decorative or applied arts. The National Gallery of Australia's collection policy states that the gallery will:

> ...collect selectively Australian applied arts not only for display but also for research and reference. Applied arts may here include fashion and theatre arts, folk art, commercial art and architectural drawings, as well as ceramics, glass, metalwork, woodwork, fibrework and textiles.[12]

Notably, when textile as a medium was used by those practitioners not specifically identified as textile artists, the classification became somewhat freer. The Art Gallery of South Australia, for instance, holds work by Narelle Jubelin and Kay Lawrence (who work with petit point and weaving techniques respectively). However it lists much of its collection of contemporary Australian textile work within its sculpture collection. This

[11] J. Corbett, op. cit.
[12] National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Policy Statement, p.9.

includes works by Joseph Beuys and Dan Driver '...and objects which include traditional textile techniques such as Fiona Hall's knitted objects tend to be looked after by our curators of painting and sculptures'[13].

The National Gallery of Victoria has a Department of Fashion and Textiles. Its policy at the time I approached them was under review, but it is worth noting the conventional convergence of textile with fashion. The curator provided a selective list of contemporary Australian and Aboriginal textile artists in the collection, including artists such as Patrick Snelling, Nicola Cerini, Annemieke Mein and Peter Tully. Their collection also includes designs by Charles Blackman and Roger Kemp which were worked by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. At least half of the artists listed are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.[14]

Work from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop figures strongly in many major gallery collections. The workshop was established at its current site in South Melbourne in 1976 and is now a firmly established and recognised element of Australia's textile and fibre art scene. It is interesting to note, though, that in 1978 the Workshop's director, Sue Walker, wrote that tapestry is 'an art form which is not part of Australia's heritage and has only recently been practised here'[15]. The tapestries are usually based upon the work of major Australian artists working in other media. Tapestries based upon designs by John Coburn, Charles Blackman, Richard Larter, Arthur Boyd and Judy Watson are in the collections of the Art Gallery of Western Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery.

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[13] Christopher Menz, Associate Curator of European and Australian Decorative Arts, personal correspondence, August 1997.

[14] Whilst acknowledging the influence of Aboriginal art, I have not included any consideration of it, as it is outside the parameters of this thesis.

[15] S. Walker, 'The Victorian Tapestry Workshop', in *Craft Australia*, southern Spring edn, vol. 3, 1978, p.28–33. Walker writes:

> The artist and the weaver collaborate closely in the preparatory stages of a tapestry – and it is hard for an artist to resist dropping in to see how the translation is going This is one of the qualities peculiar to tapestry as an art from. The weaver's role is not simply copying a painting – that would be a pointless exercise. Rather it is, through interpretation, to invest the artist's original concept with the specific qualities of tapestry [..] One of the prime motives is to maintain the overall tonal balance and to approach as nearly as possible the colours of the original art work, but there is no slavish attempt at colour matching [..] We are all conscious that the decline of tapestry as an art form occurred in the 16th and 17th centuries when slavish reproduction and colour matching were at their peak.

Apart from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop there are a number of artists whose names recur within official collections, in particular Elsje King, Beth Hatton, Heather Dorrough, Margaret Ainscow, Kay Lawrence, Tony Dyer, Jutta Feddersen, Sara Lindsay, Liz Jeneid, Narelle Jubelin and John Corbett. With the possible exception of Narelle Jubelin, these are all contemporary artists who are particularly recognised as textile artists.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales supplied a range of information (mainly about exhibitions they had staged), some of it very different in quality from that provided by the other national galleries and much of it of an international flavour. The gallery's collecting and exhibition focus appears to have been expansive and less exclusively concerned with the decorative or applied arts aspect of the textile arts. In fact much of the information concerns work that is sculptural or installation-based, and there are two particular exhibitions mentioned that illustrate the broad appreciation of the textile medium that this gallery seems to have developed. *Juice* was an exhibition of gay and lesbian work very much concerned with the 'disclosure of identity', particularly sexual identity. In the catalogue essay for *Juice*, Wayne Tunnicliffe discusses an installation by artist, Christopher Dean:

> Modernism's masculine bravura is further compromised and feminised through Dean's choice of materials, literally. Dean paints over found fabrics, in this instance chenille bedspreads, materials which then lead a double life as both object and painting. The queen-size bedspreads carry their genealogy as one of the centre pieces of the bedrooms of suburban married life, that bastion of heterosexual privilege where strict gender divisions are enacted and reinforced through 'family values' sex.[16]

The second exhibition was an installation by Ross Mellick, *Bird/Boat; Egg/Raft* in 1991. His work bears comparison with that of Magdalena Abakanowicz in its installational nature and its human references within a spatial context. As Tony Bond wrote in the catalogue essay:

[16] W. Tunnicliffe, *Juice*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997.

> Ross Mellick has been interested for some time in the nature of place as an extension of the human psyche. In 1977 he began exploring imaginatively the nature of skin as the literal and physical boundary of that place we call our bodies or ourselves.[17]

The installation included painted garments such as *Jacob's Coat*, a piece with 'such a strong material quality that we read it as a figure rather than an empty garment. It is encrusted and stiffened like a fossil or preserved hide of a bog-man'[18]. It also included yurts made from bamboo and black grizzled hair and based upon Mongolian tent-style enclosures:

> The hair had an extraordinary tactile quality but also smelled strongly of animal, not of horse or human but simply of a warm animal presence. The quality of the hair suggested the remnants of thousands of haircuttings which associated with the memory of the holocaust...

> There were clear and divergent responses to this work. For some the hair was a warm and protective experience, something to curl up in. While for others the hair-like form was read as a menacing animal presence and the bamboo structure was experienced as a protective barrier for the viewer. [Mellick] was surprised to find that there were these two general attitudes expressed which were opposite and almost always divided along gender lines. On one hand the presence within the Yurt was hostile and thought to be threatening, by contrast some read it as a desirable space, a place of retreat, safety and wellbeing. The opposition seems to be between an inside view or an outside view.[19]

I find Mellick's work significant in its strong references to space and place, the inside and outside and one's position and identity relative to these concepts. This kind of installational use of textile and fibre references the work of Joseph Beuys[20] and builds

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[17] T. Bond, 'Ross Mellick. Bird/Boat; Egg/Raft', in *Noei Lucas, Ross Mellick, Robert Owen: 3 Installations*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1991.
[18] ibid.
[19] ibid.
[20] The Art Gallery of South Australia has in its collection, *Plight*, by Joseph Beuys, a piece that consists of five rolls of brown felt. Beuys was Professor of Sculpture in Dusseldorf, Germany from 1961 to 1972 and a prominent member of the Fluxus movement during the early 1960s, a movement that believed in the convergence of art and life.

upon the connotations and associative qualities of the materials in a social, sometimes primeval, context.

Where galleries cannot classify work as sculptural they have often typified textile work as 'craft'. The National Craft Acquisition Award is hosted by the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) and the Crafts Council of the Northern Territory. The four key collecting areas of the Award are textiles, fibre, jewellery/body adornment and ceramics:

> The Award has maintained a national focus and succeeded in attracting quality work across all craft media. It has satisfied the aims of providing craftspeople and audiences in the Northern Territory with the opportunity to see work of national significance and has offered an opportunity for craftspeople throughout Australia to have work acquired by a major institution. Acquisitions from the Award have built the MAGNT's Craft Collection, which provides inspiration for local practitioners and access to significant works for people of the Northern Territory.[21]

In a catalogue for the collection a list of works is given under various categories: Ceramics, Fibre-Miscellaneous, Fibre-Paper, Fibre-Textile and Glass. Fibre-Miscellaneous includes work by John Coburn (tapestry), Beth Hatton (woven hangings), Inga Hunter (sculpture) and Marlene Thiele (baskets). Fibre-Textile is mostly clothing or lengths of fabric and includes work by James Bennett, Sarah Crowest, Tony Dyer, Jan Mackay, Glenda Morgan and Liz Williamson. MAGNT has a clearly stated mission to make sense of its immediate world by amassing

> ...collections which reflect the unique geographic, historic and cultural context in which the gallery is situated... The textile, fibre, jewellery/ body adornment and functional ceramics which provide the focus of its contemporary craft collection in many cases embody ideas, forms and techniques shared by makers around the world. Building a

[21] Entry form for the 17th National Craft Acquisition Award 1997.

collection concentrating on these areas of practice results in a fruitful exploration of influences and connections.[22]

As well these State institutions, regional galleries were also approached for information. Goulburn Regional Gallery has a well-developed relationship with textiles, albeit more within the realm of exhibition curation rather than textile collection. The only two regional galleries to hold significant textile collections are Ararat and Tamworth Regional Galleries.

Ararat, Tamworth and the 'Craft' of Critical Debate

In 1974 the Ararat Gallery established a contemporary fibre/textile art collection which it continued to develop during the 1980s with five biennial acquisitive touring exhibitions. The gallery holds a significant selection of tapestries, including work by Kay Lawrence and Tass Mavrogordato, as well as sculptural work by Richard Goodwin.[23].

In 1989 the Biennial took a new direction in an effort to address the fact that 'fibre and textiles have remained a marginalised practice both within the art world and to the general public'[24]. So the exhibition on this occasion, rather than a survey show, became a 'tightly focussed, curated and selected exhibition of the most innovative contemporary fibre art works being currently produced'[25]. The 1989 Biennial Exhibition, *Fibre and Text*, show-cased work by some of Australia's leading fibre/textile artists, including Brett Alexander, Rosemary Burke, Marie Cook, Tori de Mestre, Wendy Dodd, Moira

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[22] *Message, Matter & Form: Craft from the MAGNT Collection*, catalogue, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, 1995.

[23] Goodwin is an artist with an architectural degree who, since the 1970s, has worked with grand scale, site-specific installations. In his early work he created human scale figurative pieces out of bandage style cloth, often performance-related and generally concerned with outcasts and forgotten people, Australian Aboriginal people amongst them. Arthur McIntyre in an exhibition review in the *Age* in 1981 describes Goodwin's 'rag doll sculptural presences...[as] structurally fragile but conceptually powerful'. Other reviewers drew similar conclusions, also making reference to the wrapping, both symbolic and actual, employed by Christo in Australia at this time, wrapping the Australian coastline with huge swathes of specially designed cloth. Goodwin's work however, in its use of strips of white sheeting, was far more visceral in intent, related more to notions of embalming and death and thus exploitative in a powerful way of the ritual use of cloth in human ceremony.

[24] D. Salter, foreword, *Fibre & Text*, exhibition catalogue, Ararat Gallery, 1989, p.4.

[25] Ibid., p.4.

Doropoulos, Tony Dyer, Pamela Gaunt, Valerie Kirk, Elizabeth Lada, Raymond Lefroy, Trish Little, Greg Somerville and Jenny Toynbee-Wilson. A catalogue accompanied the exhibition, containing substantial essays by Julie Montgarrett, Jenny Zimmer and Julie Ewington. These authors addressed the issues of the contextualisation of textile art and the interrelationship between fine art and textile techniques, as well as the signification of textile or textile as language. This aimed to address what the Ararat Gallery had identified as 'a lack of a considered theoretical framework for much of current fibre and textile practice.'[26]

This view was really a culmination of concern raging around the art/craft debate since the 1970s. In an editorial report in *Craft Australia* April Hersey documented a debate related to the dearth of critical writing about the craft-based arts. What emerged from the discussion was the feeling that there was a 'lack of background information and historic context':

> Crafts in their present guise, as they have developed over the past few decades, are essentially a new field of the arts, and consequently the historic context is only now being formed,[27]

As a result of this lack of information and context, and aside from the fact that there was a shortage of writers, art critics found it difficult to write about 'craft' in a sustained and searching way and so tended to avoid the topic. This resulted in a lack of visibility for this type of work and it began to seem highly important to some practitioners and academics to address this problem, leading to a series of further articles. Robert Bell, for instance, took up the cudgels in a lecture at the Canberra School of Art. (The text of this address was reproduced in *Craft Australia.*) He addressed the issue of title (or identity) in the following manner: 'the few terms the Art World uses to describe its members - they are all unsatisfactory – artist, designer, craftsman...'[28]. Bell himself professed a

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[26] ibid., p.4.
[27] A. Hersey, 'Craft criticism', in *Craft Australia*, Summer, vol .4, 1980, pp.18–20.
[28] R. Bell, 'Crafts - The decorative arts?', in *Craft Australia*, Spring, vol. 3, 1984, pp.104–105. This was also an issue addressed by my questionnaire (see Appendix 3: Questionnaire Analysis, question 4) in which respondents provided their thoughts on this issue of title and description.

preference for the term 'applied arts'. In his address he proceeded to discuss the object and its functionality in spaces both private and public, as well as the symbolism and involvement with ritual that such objects carry and which the artist may exploit:

> Objects do have the ability to sustain a dense array of meanings and it is a role for the artist to exploit redundancy, metaphor and multiple references to increase the density of possible meanings. The artist can use his training of eye and mind, rational judgement and intuition, aggression and restraint to make objects that provide an orientation for seeing beyond and for animating space.[29]

His ultimate conclusions revolved around the issue of art and decoration and their use as a language to create meaning:

> Ornament makes things legible – it identifies things, letting us know how a thing is to be used – what to expect. The symbolic force of decoration gives some meaning beyond actual time and purpose – to make a statement of self-image, of desired social status, lifestyle of private fantasy.[30]

Nola Anderson continued this line of discussion in 1985 in an article about Australian craft and political and social issues, in which she stated that the craft object had been 'freed from function' and 'given licence to question accepted artistic and social traditions'. Craftspeople increasingly 'used their media to explore contemporary social and political issues'[31].

The debate took a further step in 1989 when Sue Rowley explored the modernist argument about art as opposed to craft,[32] namely that the strength of modernist art lay in its intellectualism and radicalism, whereas craft and its followers were tradition-bound,

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[29] ibid., p.105.
[30] ibid., p.105.
[31] N. Anderson, 'Political issues in Australian craft', in *Craft Australia*, vol. 4, Summer 1985, pp.100–103. It was also Anderson who argued that the feminist movement's concern to address women's issues utilised the exhibition form to politicise women's art work. They placed it in a public context thus endowing it with a political intent that would not have been attached to it in its original domestic context. See this thesis, Chapter One.
[32] S. Rowley, 'Mind over matter: Reading the art/craft debate?', in *West*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1989.

with an obsession for the hand-made, 'anti-technology, anti-science and anti-progress'[33]. Some commentators suggested that absorption with a material-based, task-orientated form militated against a rigorous intellectual scepticism. Rowley cites American writer, Janet Koplos, who argued that fibre failed as art when it was too concerned with material or technique, was too personal and had no content. It seems, Rowley suggests, that 'To be art, then, the work must express some concept'. The artist's 'intention to express' takes precedence over the 'materiality of the work'[34]. This argument appears to return to the binary oppositional debate with which feminism took issue in the 1970s.[35] Theorists concerned by this narrow ideological position argued determinedly for a more useful postmodern approach to the theorisation of cultural practice, one that was not reliant upon the binary opposition of art to craft, one that did not argue for the dominance of intellectualism over materialism:

> Creativity does not float insubstantially in the realm of mind, it must be anchored in a medium. The medium should be appropriate to give expression to the idea. Creative individuals choose to express themselves in one medium or another, or they choose certain media for certain projects [...] What is important and unchanging is that this is a family of objects linked by the judgement of sensitive, creative, skilled individuals who know that the particular medium will best project their ideas.[36]

My interest here is in the effects of this debate on the textile and fibre exhibitions of Ararat and Tamworth.

In spite of its attempts in 1989 to provide a curatorial and theoretical basis for its exhibition and in spite of the ongoing importance of the Ararat collection of textile art and more especially its miniature textile art, the Ararat Biennial did not survive as an ongoing event. Its place was taken by the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, now in its fourteenth year. For this reason I have decided to focus on Tamworth as a barometer of

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[33] Peter Dormer, quoted by Rowley, ibid.
[34] ibid.
[35] See this thesis, Chapter One.
[36] J. Zimmer, 'Where fibre is appropriate', in *Fibre & Text*, Biennial catalogue, Ararat Gallery 1989, p.9.

Australian contemporary textile art and to consider in the following chapter its influence within the art world in the more than twenty years since its inception.

Chapter Seven

TAMWORTH FIBRE TEXTILE BIENNIAL

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Philippe Ribbons
***Without Words VI* 1992**
Wood, paper, glass, cicada shells, bitumen

Source: *10th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, exhibition catalogue

Chapter Seven

TAMWORTH FIBRE TEXTILE BIENNIAL

> While it is impossible to discuss the multifarious nature of all the work included in this exhibition within the limitations of this introduction, it is interesting to observe that some of most [sic] provocative and poignant pieces come from artists who do not confine themselves to the fibre/textile medium. Marko Koludrovic's enigmatic row of P flags, Peter Hardy's found persian rug and Kim Mahood's emotionally loaded *Horse and Blanket*, which owes more to Joseph Beuys and the harsh Australian outback than it does to the history of fibre/textile art, capture the contemporary spirit of the exhibition, which seeks not to perpetuate stagnant aesthetics and techniques, but to demonstrate the tremendous potential for artistic and conceptual evolution offered by the fibre/textile medium.
> Felicity Fenner[1]

The Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial is a landmark exhibition for the textile and fibre medium. There is a close relationship between 'textile' and 'fibre'. I differentiate between these terms on the basis of the material. For my purposes, 'textile' is cloth and 'fibre' is plant-related or organic material. Throughout the thesis my main focus has been textile.

In my research I have addressed preconceptions of textile as a feminised craft or occupation, confined in its efficacy to the domestic space. I have discussed the role of ideology and the influence of unrecognised conceptual frameworks in constructing and perpetuating these preconceptions and I have examined the impact of feminist theory and action in contradicting and undermining them. I have considered the theories of Kenneth Boulding and Michel Foucault as they relate to the concept of power. I have identified Boulding's notion of integrative power as social power deeply ingrained with notions of legitimacy and as a force to unite and Foucault's theory of power as a productive

[1] F. Fenner, 'The discursive stitch: Contemporary fibre/textile art', *10th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1992, p.8.

network. I have identified textile within this theoretical framework as a discursive technique bound up within the order of power. Central to my thesis is the argument that within this order of power the medium of textile is strongly associated with the creation and maintenance of identity. In line with this, I will demonstrate, in this chapter, that the history of the Tamworth Biennial revolves around issues of identity – the identity of a gallery that has become coexistent with textile and, particularly, textile as art. I will examine the development of the Biennial exhibition, discuss elements of the work included and relate my theories to the curatorial premises and artistic practice represented.

The Tamworth Biennial in the 1970s

The Tamworth Biennial began as the result of a passing comment, made by a judge of the local annual art competition, that 'a fibre exhibition would probably be quite successful if it was run in Tamworth'[2]. The inaugural textile/fibre competition, initially known as the Tamworth National Fibre Exhibition, was displayed and judged in a shed on the edge of the town in 1975. A small amount of money was available to purchase work for collection.[3] The judge was Dennis Colsey, Executive Officer of the Regional Galleries Association of Victoria and member of the Craft Board of the Australia Council. The exhibition included both an art and a crafts section in addition to the fibre section. According to one account, 'The only stipulation with regard to the nature of the works in this section was that fibre, natural or synthetic must be an integral part of each work'[4]. The main acquisition of the inaugural year was a large free fall weaving by Margaret Grafton, featuring natural wool colours and natural dyes. This piece formed the genesis of the Tamworth Fibre Collection. In 1976 the award winner was Sybil Orr with *Sandstone*, a large framed triptych almost 3 metres wide, made using creative

[2] *Northern Daily Leader*, 9 October 1982. The judge, Ken Reinhart, was considering the art prize exhibition, which had a crafts section, including a wearables category. The fine art section, it appears, was not being well supported and the judge suggested that while a number of similar art prize competitions existed around Australia, there were far fewer opportunities available to the fibre/crafts person. He was taken up on the suggestion 'and this weekend there is fibre art worth more than ten thousand dollars sitting in the Tamworth Art Gallery. One hundred and thirty one standard entries from every state in Australia, New Zealand and even England are on display'.

[3] The Tamworth City Gallery continues to purchase selected works from each Biennial exhibition for its permanent collection.

embroidery. The collection purchase money was spent on a piece of machine embroidery, a large-scale portrait piece – *The Pointer Sisters* by Heather Dorrough. After 1976 the exhibition became biennial, perhaps for financial reasons and perhaps also for reasons of organisation, the exhibition still being coordinated by volunteer personnel who were members of the Tamworth Arts and Crafts Society.

The work submitted for these early exhibitions, according to papers held by the Tamworth City Gallery, varied from large three-dimensional sculptural weaving to items such as a handkerchief with bobbin lace border. The work purchased in 1978 was by Joanne Payton, a student at the Alexander Mackie College who submitted two sculptural pieces – Nut Fruit, three machine-embroidered objects resembling rough almond-style nuts and another work consisting of three hanging sections of pleated and manipulated hessian and entitled *The Mutables*. Both pieces became part of the collection. A newspaper article of the time described the exhibition as comprised of:

> ...batik, macramé, weaving in various forms, hand spinning, hand knitting, patchwork, handmade paper, handmade felt, appliqué, embroidery [...] fabric collage, bobbin lace, screen printing and even plaited steel fibres in the form of a cable are all represented [...] fibre is any thread-like substance, animal, vegetable or mineral and without fibre there is no fabric.[5]

In these early years the work is often of a large scale, both graphic and sculptural in style and ranging from a 'Bobbin Lace Handkerchief' by Jennifer Fisher to 'Stockwhip' by Geof Capel. An unconventional perspective is reflected in comments by David Green, adjudicator in 1984 and chairman of the Crafts Board of the Australia Council, who said that 'if an architect directs a girder to pass through a mass of concrete then that too is embroidery'[6]. However, the work needed to be clearly identified as or with textile, either as material or as method and the exhibition was clearly targeted at those artists and craftspeople with a strong historical relationship to the medium.

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[4] *Fibre*, October 1982, clipping amongst papers held in Tamworth City Gallery
[5] *Northern Daily Leader*. 21 September 1982.
[6] From papers held in the Tamworth City Art Gallery archive.

The Tamworth Biennial in the 1980s

From 1980 onwards it was decided to devote the whole exhibition to fibre only. The reasons for this, according to Gallery Director, Michael Rolfe,[7] were, to some extent, political. Under Neville Wran's State Labor Government there was a push for the development and professional staffing of regional galleries and the first director of the Tamworth City Gallery, James Giddey, was subsequently appointed. Accompanying policy development focused on the need for specialisation. On a pragmatic level it was becoming increasingly obvious that the smaller galleries could not compete with the major metropolitan galleries. In terms of finance and self-promotion, specialisation made sense in order to allow the gallery to build a unique identity. On the basis of the success of the Tamworth fibre exhibitions in the 1970s, fibre was therefore identified as the Gallery's designated area of specialisation, and the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial became a Biennial Survey. The Survey attracted Australia Council support through the Crafts Board and the Tamworth City Gallery began to promote itself in the art marketplace as *the* home for the most contemporary of textile pieces.

Selection for the Survey exhibition was by slide from entries received. From around three hundred entries, perhaps seventy were displayed, which meant that the survey shows of this period were very full exhibitions. Nola Anderson, in a catalogue essay overseeing the first eight years of the fibre collection, outlined the themes explored by the textile/fibre artists whose work was acquired and flagged the increasing propensity of the Tamworth Biennial to identify textile with the visual arts, to challenge the confinement of textile to its identification as craft. The landscape, man as social being, explorations of colour and form, mixed media construction and sculptural principles are all evidenced in work collected between 1975 and 1983:

> The most recent acquisitions suggest the directions that James Giddey and colleagues hope to pursue in future selections from the biennial exhibitions. He recognises a narrowing of the gap between what has traditionally been defined as fibre arts and visual arts, and is keen to explore this trend in future acquisitions. Works which begin to bridge

> the gap between the two concepts possess all the richness of materials offered by the one and the conceptual complexities of the other.[8]

In 1988 another step in the selection procedure was added so that the final selection was made on the basis of assessing the work on arrival at the Gallery. This practice continued until 1992. In 1988 the adjudicator was Robert Bell, Curator of Craft at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. In his catalogue essay, Bell wrote of textile's rich history in Australia's migrant base, a history acknowledged but challenged as a result of the social changes of the 1970s and 1980s 'resulting in demanding and confronting work'. He identified Australia's geographic relationship to Asia and Australia's aggressive fashion industry in a mostly urban-based population as influential social elements. He also noted the plurality of textile/fibre exhibitions, 'the quite different disciplines and philosophical approaches'. He suggested the time was ripe for 'more rigorous appraisal of the work' and went on to say:

> The Tamworth Fibre Exhibition has positioned itself at the crossroads of the contemporary textile and fibre field, not obviously in a geographic sense, but in a way that allows the diverse areas of the field to converge for a time every two years.[9]

In 1988, forty-six artists were represented, including some represented in State gallery collections such as Elizabeth Lada, Moira Doropoulos, Tony Dyer and Elsje King. The featured work utilised quilting, tapestry, painted silk and canvas, collage, papier-maché, weaving, basketry and machine embroidery, as well as Michael Brennand-Wood's wood-based paper collage and painted structure. The catalogue listed artists, titles and media but gave no direct indication of the artists' conceptual directions.

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[7] Michael Rolfe, personal interview, 1997.
[8] N. Anderson, catalogue essay, *Tamworth Fibre Collection 1975–1983*, Tamworth City Art Gallery, p.2, originally published as a Supplement in *Craft Australia*, Winter 1984/2.
[9] R. Bell, 'Selector's Feature', *Tamworth National Fibre Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1988.

The Tamworth Biennial in the 1990s

In 1990 the work of 46 artists was again represented. Michael Rolfe was Director of the gallery and Robert Bell was its Policy and Collection Development Consultant. Jennifer Sanders of the Powerhouse Museum was the selector. In the catalogue essay she noted that the exhibition provided an opportunity for testing the 'conceptual and technical parameters' in that it contained both 'individual works [which] stand out as being at the cutting edge', as well as 'examples of what can be achieved with particular techniques masterfully used to express an idea'. Saunders argued in particular that the biennial exhibition was 'an uncommon opportunity to check out where fibre art is heading' in that it was very much about questioning the nature and identity of textile and fibre work:

> Inspirational in their own right, these works give substance to the exhibition and context for those particular works which are at the vanguard of fibre art. Symptomatically, these latter works are hard to define, not easily categorised as this or that and tending towards the experimental. Nonetheless, conceptual exploration of the possibilities offered by technique is a looked-for feature of the Tamworth exhibition.[10]

Sanders identified colour as the theme of the 1986 exhibition, and listed three key characteristics of the 1988 exhibition:

> ...a broad geographical sweep with representation of fibre artists from all states; complexity of materials and techniques used in individual works; and, compared with earlier exhibitions, very few freestanding works though sculptural relief was a strong element in wall-hung works.[11]

She argued that the 1990 Biennial provided evidence of a much stronger focus upon imagery, whether figurative or abstract, and identified certain emergent themes – landscape (Vivien Haley and Tony Dyer), migration history (Elizabeth Lada), universal human experience (Moira Doropoulos) and the play of pattern and texture (Michael Brennand-Wood).

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[10] J. Sanders, 'Selector's comments', *9th Tamworth National Fibre Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1990, p.9.
[11] ibid. Sanders here is referencing an article in *Craft Arts*, no.16, pp.110–111.

The use of landscape as subject matter is strong in textile work; the organic nature of the medium seems to lend itself beautifully to the expression of environmental concerns. Through work such as Haley's *Coastal Road Rebuild* (1990) and Helen Sanderson's *Ballandean* (1989), the artists speak of their particular identification with elements of their own environment. Their concerns mirror, with more contemporary inflections, the work of Australian painters such as Arthur Streeton and David Davies in creating iconic Australian images. Elizabeth Lada's work *For Maria – Bonegilla Mantle* (1990) is also very much about the Australian experience and identity, though in this case from the perspective of migrants. The piece takes the format of a religious cope which is used to clothe or represent the migrant and to suggest how difficult it may be to reconfigure an identity in a new place with new customs and still retain important elements of an older place and time. Lada's work reminds us of the historical pieces discussed in chapter four, the traditional Kastellorizo bridal costume in the National Gallery of Australia, the Latvian folk costumes and embroidered linen and the banners made for the Migration Museum in Adelaide. The artist uses the associations and resonance of textile with varied identities to articulate her message about the people with whom she is concerned.

According to Michael Rolfe,[12] 1992 and 1994 were significant years for the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial exhibition because of changes to the focus and selection method. Selection was now made through studio visits as well as by slide presentation. While the exhibition had always tried to be cutting edge, with a mix of emerging and established practitioners, the focus in the 1990s was on visual art rather than functional craft. The 1992 exhibition presented the work of twenty-five artists, almost half the number of previous years. Rolfe wrote in the 1992 exhibition catalogue of the exhibition's aim to present '*new and leading edge*, around the idea of presenting a national survey of art based fibre/textile'. He went on to say:

> Importantly, not all artists represented consider themselves *textile artists*. The material used simply satisfies the nature of their *art making* at present. Gone is an emphasis on promoting technique and media obsession. In its place comes a renewed and essential reliance on

> artists and ideas. Ultimately, there developed a particular curatorial desire to provoke and to provide a reassessment and direction for Tamworth and its collection into the nineties.[13]

Kay Lawrence, writing in 1997, claimed that Rolfe's comments ignited huge concern amongst some sectors of the textile world. It fanned debate as to whether Tamworth should retain a focus on those artists 'who *position* their work within textile traditions' or should move to include work by artists using textile but who 'would not consider themselves textile artists'[14]. The importance of position or context should be noted here. How important is the place from which the artist speaks and with which the artist identifies, and how does this affect the medium? For some artists and commentators this has been an issue of some concern. There have been those who regard the textile arts as having a special quality with which they strongly identify and wish to see retained, not wanting to see it subsumed within an amorphous 'fine arts' category.[15] Tamworth was 'criticised for losing its focus on textile practice and becoming just another mixed media show'[16]. Tamworth was identified as a specifically 'textile' exhibition, although the debate about the exact nature of this 'textile' identity, the relative importance of method and material, was exactly the point of contention.

Diana Wood Conroy, an influential artist and writer, who, I suggest, is firmly situated within the contemporary textile art world, also took up the issue of 'positionality' when writing about the relationship between textiles and the wider art world. While supportive of art practice that utilises textile material and techniques, she expressed concern at the direction that Tamworth was taking and the possible limitation of opportunities for those artists, working from a crafts perspective, for whom technique was an essential ingredient of their work. She wrote that:

> My point has never been to disallow any aspect of art practice that avails itself of textile attributes (which I have described as deeply investigative) but merely to emphasise the

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[12] M. Rolfe, personal interview, 1997.
[13] M. Rolfe, Introduction, *10th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1992.
[14] K. Lawrence, 'Second look', *Textile Fibre Forum*, vol. 16, issue 1, no. 48, 1997.
[15] See Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, questions 15–17, for artists' comments, e.g. nos 53 and 95.
[16] ibid., e.g. no 14

> importance of maintaining some forum for the integration of conceptual sophistication *allied* with developed craft skills for people coming from craft backgrounds [...] Using craft histories to engage in issues of subversion has benefited many notable visual artists who carefully avoid any contextualisation with the crafts.[17]

Artists such as Kathy Temin and Narelle Jubelin both use textile or textile technique, but neither would be positioned as textile artists, although they have a strong association with the medium. Jubelin has quite consistently used textile references, specifically small, finely executed, petit point images, often contained within cleverly crafted wooden frames which she collects for the purpose. Jubelin has often used this traditional, gentle, intimate medium to reference the very public space of colonialist exploration – such as, for instance, in an image of the ice-encrusted features of Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson or a representation of male surveyors in the Australian desert. Petit point images have been included in her site-specific installations in public spaces, such as, for example, *Foreign Affairs* in the Customs Hall in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1991:

> This complex show – composed of four sets of miniatures placed in four corners of the mezzanine level of the Customs House – referenced particular aspects of Charleston's history, and charted the relationship of that history to aspects of internationalism. The four sets of petit points included renditions of ivory portrait miniatures and miniature-like samplers of a Guggenheim catalogue list. The other two sets include renditions of slave tags and ironwork [...] Each rendition refers to a history of relations between the local, national and international zones, inter-connected by trade links.[18]

Neither Jubelin nor Temin, both significant and well-considered Australian artists, have ever been selected for the Tamworth Biennial, although Temin's work was included in *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Australian Textile Art*, a travelling exhibition of Australian textile art curated by Sue Rowley and American academic, Christopher Leitch. Of Temin's work Rowley wrote:

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[17] D. Wood Conroy, 'Curating textiles: Tradition as transgression', *Object*, issue 4, 1994/5, cited in K. Lawrence, 'Second look', *Textile Fibre Forum*, vol. 16, issue 1, no. 48, 1997.
[18] D. Losche, 'Subtle tension in the work of Narelle Jubelin', *Art and Australia*, vol. 29, no. 4, Winter 1992, pp.461–467.

> The first thing that hits you about Kath Temin's 'problems' is the tacky synthetic fur and the queasy feeling that these white squares with various appendages might be highly confronting if they were not so absurd [...] Her work shares with the studio craft movement a self conscious insistence on its own materiality, but to utterly different ends. The work does not valorise either the materials or the making, but explores the cultural significance and signification of tastelessly sensuous fabrics and formulaic design. [19]

Temin's work references and plays with the tenets of modernism. Her use of textile is postmodern in its collusion and apparent identification with the ideas that it critiques. Wood Conroy's wry comments regarding identification and contextualisation spring to mind here. Temin seems to utilise prejudicial views of textile in ways that can seem quite cynical and manipulative. Jubelin never compromises the medium in the way that Temin appears to do. Jubelin utilises the public/private dichotomy to reposition textile as an element within a very public world, and one effect of so doing is to reposition women within history by using a means of expression, petit point, very much associated with them.

The 1992 Tamworth catalogue also included an essay by Valerie Kirk, Head of Textiles at the Canberra School of Art. Kirk reflected on the animated debate about the direction of contemporary textile art practice in relation to its 'past glories', 'the exciting time of change in the 60s and 70s' when Hicks and Abakanowicz 'became well known as modern artists' and '[a]ny rules could be broken'. She argued that the critics 'fail to acknowledge that after the initial fervour and rebelliousness a maturing process has to take place' but she acknowledged that the 'diversity of concerns under the *Textiles* umbrella, had led to public confusion':

> To the initiated the differences are clear. For the uninitiated these problems of identity and direction must be addressed. As we have reached a time of questioning, issues such as, the acknowledgment of standards, the effectiveness of education, the role of galleries and audience, patronage and sponsorship, need to be addressed...The medium should be introduced as a valid area of exploration, with its own history, tradition and contemporary

[19] S. Rowley, 'Kathy Temin', *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Australian Textile Art*, exhibition catalogue, University of Wollongong, 1995, pp.40-41.

> practice [...] Textile artists need to question and to continually re-assess their work and position within the broad areas of art and textiles. Where does the medium stand in our culture and time and in relation to other cultures and periods in time.[20]

In the essay Kirk argued that contemporary textile art practice was undergoing a 'crisis of identity' and that resolving this would lead to greater confidence and mature growth as an art medium. Implicit in her comments was the notion that the Tamworth Biennial is a significant player in this process. Her comments were further progressed by Felicity Fenner, who argued in the same exhibition catalogue that cutting edge textile practice does not mean 'a banal rejection of history and tradition, but an intelligent response towards its integration into current technical, conceptual and ideological concerns'[21]. It seems to me that at the heart of this debate was the concern that standards of textile practice would drop if method was not respected, if technical expertise was overlooked. Perhaps it was felt that upholding the value of such expertise ensured due recognition of the painstaking and careful work of women over many centuries. For some, this careful dedicated practice formed part of the essence of textile.

Tamworth and the Artists' Views

The debate regarding the 'diversity of concerns' and the issue of positionality is still an issue, as evidenced by the answers to my questionnaire directly relating to the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial.[22] When asked for their views on the significance of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, the majority of questionnaire respondents (65%) expressed general support. Twenty-five per cent (25%) were either unsure of its value (some because they had never heard of it, although some of those who had not heard of it supported the concept anyway) or expressed strong reservations about it. For example:

> I think the success of the Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial exhibition depends on the criteria (?) and then (for me) to be able to read a critical review of it. I think it's difficult to

[20] V. Kirk, 'Education and Textile Art – Australia', *10th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1992, p.5.
[21] F. Fenner, op. cit., p.6.
[22] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results. (All respondents' comments are listed in this appendix.)

> show more traditional work and more conceptually based work together in the same exhibition. Just being both fibre /textile based isn't enough of a reason.[23]

Six respondents viewed the Biennial entirely negatively, as evidenced by the following comments:

> There is good art and bad art and whether it is textiles or not is unimportant. I am well aware of a perceived need by many Australian textile practitioners to be seen as 'serious artists', and I think this is a total waste of time. We might be better served by dropping the label of 'textile artist' altogether. Have you ever heard of a 'painting artist' or a 'jewellery artist?[24]

> I have made efforts to see it in the past (more difficult now). I am chagrinned [sic] that you are no longer invited to submit slides for selection to the exhibition. Not having seen the most recent exhibition I would hope it was composed more of artists working within the textile tradition, than artists using textiles occasionally. There surely are enough of the former to choose from.[25]

> The last few years – work I had seen selected for it left me very concerned about the direction of textiles. I felt that many works didn't reflect what the essence of textiles is. The work was very impersonal, hard, loss of intimacy in textiles, textiles trying to be like painting and sculpture – trying so hard to be a fine art, to be cool – I lost respect for Tamworth as a textile exhibition. I don't value Tamworth's Biennial Exhibition. I haven't even heard much about it recently – I'm surprised you've even mentioned it in your survey. I don't think it has any relevance.[26]

These comments reflect some of the arguments active at the time that Kirk and Rowley were writing their essays, arguments such as whether textile should remain 'true' to its origins and traditional in its context and form, and what should be valued in textile work – the craft practice or the concept. The arguments about the 'essence' of textile mirror the essentialism/constructionism debate that raged within feminist theory as to whether there is some innate quality of femaleness. There appear to be similar concerns around issues of identity - that innate identity of women which should not be compromised and within textile circles the same strong feeling that textile has some unique essential quality.

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[23] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, questions 15, 16 and 17, no. 56.
[24] ibid., no. 35.
[25] ibid., no. 53.

Writer Diana Fuss argued however in relation to the feminist debate that whether a text is essentialist or not is less important than how or why it is used and what are its political and textual effects?[27] This kind of analysis can be extended to the Tamworth Biennial itself.

Of those respondents who supported the concept of the exhibition, many did so because of its potential to raise the profile of textile as art medium and to allow for its evolution and development. For example: 'An established, high standard *touring* exhibition with diversity can influence very positively the Australian textile as "art" '[28]. Such respondents supported the Biennial as a way of educating the general public about textile and art generally, and also as a means of educating artists and creating dialogue amongst them, particularly as it is a travelling exhibition. A few saw it as being important as a cutting edge exhibition: 'It is probably the most significant textile exhibition in terms of being on the frontier of development of textiles as an art form'[29]. Others recognised its potential to the individual artists as a form of advertising and promotion. However, one artist, whose work had been included, responded: 'It can be enormously supportive to use a language that is shared – but personally I found it constrictive in the way in which one is perceived'[30]. This comment indicates that being too closely identified with textile as a result of the exhibition might create difficulties when it comes to being accepted as part of the wider contemporary art world. Concern was also expressed about the apparent 'ghettoisation' of textile as an art form. While many respondents believed that it had raised textile's profile, there was a definite feeling that it is time for textile to take its place as a legitimate part of a visual language; it therefore should be included in general exhibitions and not just textile shows. One respondent, a previous exhibitor at Tamworth, noted that the exhibition is:

> [s]ignificant in that it brings a body of textile work together. However the techniques people use are so broad I'm not sure how important it is to keep work in textiles separate

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[26] ibid., no. 95.
[27] See chapter one of this thesis.
[28] ibid., no. 2.
[29] ibid., no. 23.
[30] ibid., no. 10.

> continually from other art. Artists use many mediums, so do we need to place fibre/textiles in a category on its own. It should be included in more broad reaching exhibitions.[31]

And another artist responded:

> There is a history of specialist textile exhibitions starting with the Ararat miniatures which have given textile art credibility. It is time now that textile artists took their place in general art exhibitions. Painters and mixed media artists use lots of textiles in their work and I would like to see textile artists who have a particular sensitivity to the textile medium exhibiting under the same conditions.[32]

This is an issue that Ewington flags in her Ararat Biennial catalogue essay when she asked 'will the presentation of a media-specific exhibition like this one continue to be necessary?'[33].

Thematic Curation

In returning to the development of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, I mention one work in particular from the 1992 exhibition which typifies the broadened parameters of textile as medium and encapsulates the attitudes, which in some quarters had aroused concern. The 1992 catalogue included short artist statements. I quote from one by Philippe Ribbons, relating to his work *Without Words VI*, constructed from wood, paper, glass, cicada shells and bitumen, using combined processes:

> I am not intent on accepting to ever be bound by any set of media, technique or conceptual process, by which any of my work is finished. I aim to challenge what we perceive and what we accept; my background in fibre has lead me to apply this philosophy within (and without) this media area, utilising materials which, by their very definition, fulfil the requirements of the medium. Found materials and objects know remnants of other times.[34]

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[31] ibid., no. 38.
[32] ibid., no. 22.
[33] J. Ewington, 'A thing of shreds and patches', *Fibre & Text: Ararat Gallery 1989 Biennial*, exhibition catalogue, Ararat Gallery, 1989, p.14.
[34] P. Ribbons, artist statement, *10th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial 1992*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1992, p48.

His work seems to echo this sense of self-purpose: significantly, he has used the cicada shells to construct the word 'ego.' He maintains his right to develop his identity as an artist, using any medium of his choice that will help to speak his message and identify his concerns.

While the debate about the direction of textile raged, the Tamworth exhibition was moving towards thematic curation for the 1996 exhibition. In a discussion with me Michael Rolfe argued that thematic curation had the benefit of providing more focus and coherence and that Tamworth was tapping into the increased strength of textile in university and visual arts courses. He insisted that other activities around the country now catered for the practitioners for whom Tamworth used to be an exhibition venue. He agreed that the changes had provoked controversy, especially amongst those people for whom technique is the most important thing. But for Tamworth:

> [T]he technique is not the most important thing. The technique is an interesting thing, it has great links to history and traditions and it might even come to the fore with this next show – the multicultural. Because I think in some respects, maybe, technique is more representative of cultural influences than many things, just the way things are done, the materials used, the patterns and so forth [...] so it may well come to the fore again. But I think a lot of people who saw themselves as eligible for the exhibition focussed more on technique than anything else [...] their ability to get something done.[35]

Thus argument continued about the direction of textile as an art medium. Its identity, as far as the Tamworth Biennial was concerned, was not primarily about technique or craft. The Tamworth City Gallery was concerned with textile as visual art and by 1994 was starting to move the development of contemporary textile in a specifically intellectual and conceptual direction. In the 1994 exhibition catalogue, Rolfe announced that this exhibition would be the last of the survey shows and that:

> Advertisements have recently been placed calling for 'expressions of interest' from curators to develop proposals for the 1996 Biennial and beyond. These advertisements signal a change of direction, the Tamworth Biennial is to become tightly curated and thematically

[35] M. Rolfe, personal interview, 1997.

> linked. Allowing. I feel, a more effective contribution to the development of issues, arguments and ideas of interest to the visual arts/craft community, and a more focussed targeting of the considerable resources provided for this project by the Tamworth City Council.[36]

The 1996 curator, Daniel Brine, acknowledged that, for a long time, the Tamworth Biennial had provided the only regular forum for artists specifically working in fibre and textiles. He also commented in his catalogue essay on the influence of the arts professionals who had been involved over the years – 'the organisers of the first biennials, James Giddey and Robert Bell in the 1980s and most recently, Michael Rolfe'[37]. This ties in with comments made by Rolfe:

> One of the reasons we have changed the way we have selected things is to keep it relevant [...] is to keep the funding bodies interested [...] to show that it's something that is still alive and it's not just something that is repeating itself for no real reason which is what it was in danger of doing [...] We are known within the industry for what we do and that's good. That's why we have changed, it's marketing as much as anything, it's all those sorts of strategies and to be productive is essential in terms of the art but also for the marketing of the product.[38]

In other words, politics has played its part just as it did in the initial stages of the exhibition's development, when specialisation was introduced in order to establish an identifiable position, to attract funding and thus to survive. I am reminded here of Foucault's analysis of discourse and its operation within structures of power, which I quote here again:

> The production of all types of texts is not an indifferent matter in the operations of power. These 'texts', whether they are works of art, or written texts, are bound up within the order

[36] M. Rolfe, Introduction, *11th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, exhibition catalogue, Tamworth City Gallery, 1994.
[37] D. Brine, catalogue essay, *11th Tamworth Fibre/Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, exhibition catalogue, 1994.
[38] ibid.

> of power, not only or most interestingly, at a representational level, but in terms of their capacity to be harnessed and utilised, put to work in regimes of knowledge – power.[39]

The curator can perhaps be described as being one of the means by which the text is harnessed within this particular regime of knowledge. The Tamworth Biennial is a regime of knowledge, 'bound up within the order of power', the administrative power structures of the art world, for example. A curator exercises control over what part of the discourse is heard, if not over all that is said. He or she has the power to use elements of a discourse to construct a new or alternative discourse which will operate at another level and shape another perspective. And discourse/language is significant in identity. As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us in her analysis of French theorists such as Derrida, Lacan and Julia Kristeva:

> Language is not merely a system of naming, labelling or even communication. It is the threshold of all possible meaning and value [...] Given the intense focus on questions about subjectivity, identity and consciousness in these *antihumanist* frameworks of subjectivity, language is a structuring device, a condition for the production of subjects.[40]

While it is not within the scope of this thesis to consider in any depth the issue of language and its role in the construction of identity, it is necessary to flag its importance in considering textile as an element within the language of the visual arts. I will return to this idea later within this chapter when considering the work of artists in the most recent Tamworth Biennials.

A curator's controlling influence is a situation not readily accepted by everyone. Some artists responding to the questionnaire supported Tamworth as a curated exhibition:

> Enormously important as a selected, curated exhibition. It's also important to see textiles in mixed media exhibitions.[41]

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[39] E. Grosz, in Moore, op. cit., p.141.
[40] E. Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989, p.39. 'Antihumanism asserts that there is no human essence and no pregiven, universal identity.'
[41] Appendix 3: Questionnaire results, questions 15, 16 and 17, no. 44.

> The recent Tamworth exhibitions have been interesting. The involvement of curators, selection and thematic have all contributed to stronger exhibition. Group (specialist) shows are important *as* is the involvement of textile artists in conceptual thematic shows.[42]

And some did not:

> [Textile/fibre exhibitions] create a venue for a very high standard of contemporary textile work. Problems: curator driven lately – would be more exciting if generally advertised and submissions from *all* over Australia asked for.[43] (This from a previous exhibitor.)

> I don't see it as the pinnacle of textiles. Often it seems who the curator knows – there is never a wide call for proposals.[44]

While some seem uncertain:

> The Tamworth Biennial has changed from a forum show to a selected curated exhibition; it has always been a survey of current trends – and may become even more selective as a curatorial venue. Somebody should document its history/change before the origins are lost.[45] (This from a Tamworth exhibitor.)

It was interesting to note that previous exhibitors at Tamworth were not unequivocal in their support, as in this comment, for example:

> An important exhibition – *but* needs different curators and needs to be more widely advertised to invite/include more artists – It appears to be a NSW based, centred exhibition – rather than "National Exhibition".[46]

There seems to have been a concern that a changed format for the Tamworth exhibition meant that textile artists were in danger of losing their voice, a place from which to speak. Many women who use textile do seem to regard it as a woman's voice, her language and the place in a contemporary world from which she can speak with some authority. Tamworth in its original form offered women this supportive space.

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[42] ibid., no. 101.
[43] ibid., no. 57.
[44] ibid., no. 70.
[45] ibid., no. 7.
[46] ibid., no. 26.

What difference has curation actually made to the three exhibitions since its introduction? Daniel Brine (curator in 1996) argued that he provided no theme but 'a framework which illuminates the existing practice of a range of artists... While previous Tamworth biennials have been exhibitions *of* fibre and textiles this exhibition is *about* fibre/textiles'[47]. His curatorial thesis was that it should be possible to have an exhibition *about* a medium not simply an exhibition *of* a medium. Artists should have the freedom to explore the nature of their discourse 'without being locked into a fixation on materiality'[48]. Hence the work in this exhibition encompassed performance/installation (Anne Graham), installation/colour copy laser documentation (Marianne Penberthy), graphite on paper (Robyn Daw), colour photocopies (Brett Alexander), mixed media – fabric dye, performance/photography (Kylie Nadin) and galvanised wire, silk and optical fibre (Elena Gallegos), as well as the more usually accepted textile elements of quilting, tapestry, crochet and basketry techniques used by artists such as Yvonne Koolmatrie (the first inclusion of an Aboriginal artist), Sara Lindsay and John Corbett. In all cases, though, irrespective of medium, the reference was textile or textile practice explored by the curator in such a way as to consider what constitutes the medium and what it is being used to say. In the most overt way, therefore, this, the first curated Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, was very much about the identity of textile in the mid-1990s.

Many Voices

The exhibitions in 1998 and 2000 were both curated by Gillian McCracken. The 1998 exhibition, *Many Voices,* slotted into the Cultural Olympiad and its theme of 'sea change' in multicultural influences generally:[49]

> The 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial explores the multiple cultural influences evident in Australian fibre textile practice. Textiles of all cultures vividly illustrate the story of

[47] D. Brine, op. cit.
[48] ibid.
[49] M. Rolfe, personal interview, 1997.

> exchange and influence generated through trade, exploration, migration, religious expansion and enforced relocation.[50]

In chapter four of this study I noted the importance of the social and historical aspect of textile to the large number of textile artists who responded to my questionnaire. I also suggested that the costumes and textile artefacts from other cultures preserved in museums and galleries serve to embody the distinctive immigrant elements of the Australian community and by this means help to empower them. Similarly McCracken used the Tamworth exhibition to explore, through contemporary textile art practice, the multiple cultural heritages that constitute the fabric of late twentieth century Australian society. She tapped into the debate about the identity of the Australian nation itself. She recognised that textile had significant potential to address issues of identity in a society which had expressed concern about the question. She writes that:

> Undoubtedly fibre textile practice is an eloquent language for exploration and articulation of this complexity. Textiles of all cultures have vividly illustrated dialogues of exchange throughout history.[51]

McCracken was the first to display at Tamworth, on any large scale, Aboriginal influence on Australian textile contemporary art practice. She also expressed a desire to explore, through her curatorial choices, the 'domestic formative environment', as well as exchanges with Asian culture and the 'Northern European influences of the 1960s and 70s'. Her search was for expressions of identity, examples of ways in which artists used textile to access their cultural heritage. There were strong references in this exhibition to the varied ethnic textile examples of costume and embroidery held as migration and settlement artefacts in museums around Australia.[52] Through these references some of the artists in this exhibition remembered a rich cultural heritage while simultaneously recognising a sense of personal dislocation.

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[50] M. Rolfe, Introduction, *Many Voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998.
[51] G McCracken, Introduction, *Many Voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998, p.3.

I earlier examined the ways that women in Australian history have constructed ceremonial and religious textiles, making banners and cloths to support the work of their church or, as in Sophie Staffanoni's case, embroidering the rich vice-regal coats that made status and power visible. In *Many Voices* Carmel D'Ambrosio's contemporary group of works, *Feast Your Eyes*, references religious vestments but using rather different materials. She used sun-dried tomatoes with nylon filament and lurex gold thread to construct an icon-style clergyman's shawl that reflected the religion and culture of her Italian heritage. Her artwork specifically spoke of the impact of Italian religious vestments and ecclesiastical garments, their richness in comparison with the poverty of lifestyle of some Italian countrymen and the political ramifications of this. *'Feast Your Eyes* satirises the extravagant display of the Roman Catholic Church supported through the providence and labour of its congregation.'[53] Whereas the gold embroidery evokes power and wealth, the sun-dried tomatoes evoke the scent and smells of a distant land, the dark lustre creating a sense of an earthy wealth that supports the somewhat predatory splendour of the church. D'Ambrosio's textile piece subverts the status quo through the use of its artefacts and their associative power.

In a similar way Greg Kwok Keung-Leong's highly decorated piece *Turandot Leong's 1997 Tasmanian May Day Nuptial Robe* (1997) also drew upon the history of a garment with a solemnly ceremonial background, in this case subverted to speak of a gay identity. The opulent yellow and pink satin Chinese-style Australian gown is decorated with medallion-style images of gay Tasmanian activist, Rodney Croome and celebrates his achievements in gay law reform. Through his textile work Greg Leong celebrated with pride an identity originally considered by society as covert and confused. As well as confronting the issue of sexual identity, his work tapped into the issue of Australia's place and identity within Asia and the situation facing those of an Asian background living within Australia's boundaries.

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[52] See Chapter Four of this thesis.
[53] G. McCracken,, op. cit., p.6.

In addition a number of the artists represented in *Many Voices* spoke of domesticity and a sense of identity or connection with women and their work. Holly Story used hand-coloured photographs overlaid by very traditional floral embroidery in her table runner *Drawn from Memory* (1998). The runner referenced 'the ideology of the home and particularly women's role as home maker in it'[54]. However she is also questioning the impact of colonialism in Australia, the limitations of a view that saw Australia as 'unowned land...[with] unnamed species of flora and fauna which resulted in the imposition of names such as Banksia Quercifolia for an indigenous plant.'[55] Philomena (Rebola) Hali, Pilar Rojas, Laurie (Boutagy) Paine, Rosemary Lakerink, Gwen Egg and Rhonda Hamlyn all worked in very different ways but from similar influences. Hamlyn's work, *Mark* (1997), made using mixed fibres and layered stitch, married a semblance of Modernism with a contemporary inner sensibility and personal concern for domestic history and a woman's place within it. Her piece is reminiscent of a Roger Kemp-style abstraction, but she said of it:

> For many years my mother and I worked together on each piece in our home. We felt we had no family history that we could look back to, that we were the beginning. I continue to work in this way on my own now. I explore ideas and work in a contemplative journey. My works are not a narrative, nor are they abstract...[56]

McCracken explains that Hamlyn is involved in:

> ...serious investigations of language, its ambiguities and multiple readings. Mark and matter represent words with multiple meanings some of which are in direct opposition, 'mark' might be name, identification, defacement, an achievement, just as 'matter' might describe substance, density as in felting, dullness or the essence of an issue.[57]

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[54] Holly Story quoted in Artists' Statements and Interviews, *Many Voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998, p.36.
[55] G. McCracken, op.cit., p.5.
[56] Rhonda Hamlyn quoted in Artists' Statements and Interviews, *Many Voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, Tamworth City Gallery, 1998, p.10.
[57] McCracken, op.cit., p.5.

Each of these artists was expressing something of their own personal history or exploring their own perspective about the Australia in which they live. They have used the medium of textile for its associative qualities both as material and technique and they have paid their personal respects to a history of textile and its power as a discourse. Their work is often subversive, presenting an alternative view of Australian society, raising 'many voices'. The artists themselves are some of the 'many voices' of Australian contemporary textile art whose art practice was united and mediated through the single curatorial voice of McCracken, who recognised the considerable power of textile as a medium to explore the nature of identity in the Australia of 1998.

'frisson'

The 2000 Biennial, *frisson*, continued the theme of multi-cultural influence but this time, with a more specific emphasis upon textile as language. The Director of the Tamworth City Gallery at this time was Brian Langer, who, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue, writes about the various materials and techniques utilised and the implications these carry for meaning, arising:

> ...not only from the language inherent in the use of such materials and techniques, but also from the responsiveness of fibre and textile practices to the many voices, beliefs and desires of Australian society. The multi-layering of meaning in these works is also a unique opportunity to explore the distinctiveness of Australian society and the complex notions of identity...[58]

The end of the twentieth century was a time for Australia to take stock, to consider its position. The exhibition title, *frisson*, denoted excitement and a pleasurable shiver of fright. It responded to the feeling that the start of the new century heralded a transition to a less singular notion of Australian identity and an appreciation of its multilateral, multicultural nature. A modernist perspective had been replaced by a postmodern acceptance of multiplicity. In the same way the perceived inflexibility of tradition was being modified or rejected:

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[58] B. Langer, Introduction, *14th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial: frisson,* exhibition catalogue, 2000, p.3.

> The implications and interrogatory possibilities of contemporary textile and fibre practices in the un-weave, re-weave debates of republicanism and the second century of nationhood is also starting to be understood.[59]

Sarat Maharaj, Professor of Art History and Theory at Goldsmith's College in London has had significant influence upon modern textile theory. He places great emphasis upon difference and diversity and the strength of textile as a signifier in this terrain. Maharaj has written that the 'otherness of textiles becomes a critical force in the mega-visual system of contemporary thinking in imagining nation in fluid and infinite dimension'[60]. McCracken adopted this theme in her curatorial premise and, referring to Maharaj, states in her catalogue essay that:

> ...through textiles it is possible to explore the critical social issues of contemporary culture through many dimensions which draw from the multiple cultural beliefs and traditions within Australian society and in 2000 the Biennial demonstrates this through the diverse work of twenty seven artists.[61]

The 2000 Biennial, *frisson*, addressed the role of textile in expressing diversity. It critiqued textile art practice and its changing forms of expression over the latter decades of the twentieth century. In other words it confronted the issue of method and material within textile practice and assessed the implications for the identity not only of a medium but also of a nation. Thus the new millennium was a time to take stock as well as a time to preview the future. Artists who have impacted upon and influenced textile practice were included – Kay Lawrence, Elsje Van Keppel, Liz Williamson and Valerie Kirk, as well as emerging textile artists. Artists such as Williamson focused on language. In her work, *Blanket* (2000) Williamson used the idea of darned cloth as a metaphor for a lifetime of experience that shapes and moulds an individual and helps to create a unique personal identity. Her darned blanket represented, too, the expression of a love and care, which repairs and prolongs. Jane Whiteley referenced the darning stitch as a form of

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[59] G. McCracken, catalogue essay, *14th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial: frisson*, Tamworth City Gallery, 2000., p.6.
[60] S. Maharaj, cited in McCracken, op. cit., p.7.

language in *Letter to Auntie Net I* (2000): 'In the seams, folds, patches, darning, there is a universal language of cloth that goes beyond words'[62]. Elsje Van Keppel's statement is a dictionary definition of the word 'trace' and her art piece, *Trace* (2000), was a visual representation of the word. The concepts of language, identity and diversity recurred repeatedly.

Again the textile of ceremony and ritual found a 'modified' place. Christine Collins, in *White Lies* (1999), a crown and mantle made from thousands of miniature plastic soldiers, woven together with fine wire, referenced the regalia of Western society. Of her work Collins says:

> The relationship between aesthetics and power informs the body of work *White Lies*, which includes a series of monarchical regalia and a large mantle. Such objects are usually beautiful, highly decorative, finely detailed and constructed from rare and opulent materials; features which signify the authority that these objects represent and operate as spectacle to camouflage the inherent power and nature of subjection. Whilst the crown sparkles on the head of the hierarchical leader, the cloak conceals what lies beneath [...] My intent is to disturb the aesthetic layer which cloaks traditions, values, and hierarchies of the previous century.[63]

Collins used the language of textile with reference to its historical ability to identify those in positions of power and authority but in ways that subverted that history, drawing upon its power, taking it in a different direction and questioning the validity of that identity.

As in the 1990 Biennial, the Australian landscape was still an enduring theme in the 2000 Biennial, such as in the woven native plant imagery of Jennifer Robertson. Robertson migrated from England to a country that she described as 'alienating'. Her work is about 'the process of relationship' in preference to 'identity' but it is still very much about coming to terms with and finding a personal space within an 'unfamiliar' and different

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[61] ibid., p.7.
[62] ibid., artist statement, p.34.
[63] ibid., artist statement, p.16.

place. The body also figured directly as a theme in *frisson*, as in *Reduction #1* (2000) by Pearl Rasmussen, who describes her reductive garments as:

> visual metaphors to reveal industrial (material) and imagined (my perspective) structures that exist on the human body as a result of the assimilation of technology and consumption...In a sense I am scratching away at notions of what surfaces cloth, body and identity consist of.[64]

Also dealing with issues of identity in a very material way, and with strong references to garments, cloth and body, was *Joustavuus* (1999) by Arja Välimäki. This piece consisted of an extremely tall, elongated but elegant evening dress:

> Made by using the inner tubes from car tyres to reveal flexibility of self-identity. The black scrap material reflects the internal feelings of stepping into a new century with the expectations it brings with it. Optimism comes out with the freedom of slicing up and then reconstructing. Similar to national identity of Australia [sic] where many migrants have been ripped from their roots only to become one in a multicultural environment and form an exciting rich national identity.[65]

It seems to me that the theories of difference and deconstruction around which feminist positions have revolved, as discussed in chapter one, are clearly revealing their impact and effect here. There is a determination to recognise and value a diversity of identity - as feminist philosophers maintained that we should not all be judged by a dominant and oppositional canon. And Derrida's theory of deconstruction is also evident as these textile artists explore language using the vernacular of textile to examine how meanings are constructed. Meanings are not fixed but are created through context and relationships. Through reference and re-contextualisation new meanings and new identities may be created. The power of textile as a medium to reference historical context and resultant identities is recognised within the context of art and the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial.

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[64] ibid., artist statement, p.27.
[65] ibid., artist statement, p.32.

Material Witness

Materiality and the body are the important elements of the 15th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial in 2002, entitled *Material Witness*. Robyn Daw has curated this, the most recent exhibition. Her curatorial theme picks up on ideas expressed in an earlier catalogue essay for the 1995 exhibition, *Tradition Cloth Meaning*, where she wrote of the familiarity of textile in a common everyday domestic world and its fundamental link to the body 'through covering, layering, wearability'[66]. For this reason, she surmised, textiles are a fine art medium that seem less remote or intimidating and from this circumstance arises textile's strength in subversion. This theme is taken up in her essay for *Material Witness* where she writes:

> Textiles are strongly embedded in our physical realm, through process, making and display. They have a fundamental link to the body, to architecture and to material culture in a unique way, existing in our space rather then offering a glimpse through a window to another world. Unlike other media that require the viewer to comprehend an invented space of the artists [sic] making, the space of textiles is also our own.[67]

Daw picks up on the materiality of the medium, its associations and the possibilities for developing new ways of thinking or 'revitalising traditional practices in ways that directly relate to specific contemporary issues of a personal, political and/or social nature'. While the emphasis is on the material aspect of textile practice, that is, the actual materials and methods used, the association is with the body – 'the artist's presence', 'traces of that person' as well as the 'social, political, geographic or economic undertones associated with [textile's] place of origin'.

I discern references in this latest Biennial to the 1970s' feminist concern with the body, the determination to speak of its material, often 'distasteful' aspects. Tactility reigns supreme, feelings are to be experienced, not submerged and denied. During the 1970s sexuality and the corporeality of the body was to be explored and articulated, not repressed. This preoccupation with the body is revitalised but in less aggressive and more

[66] R. Daw, *Tradition Cloth Meaning*, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart, 1995, p.8.

exploratory ways, with more sensibility and with more of a nod to an invisible essence as, for instance, in David Sequeira's *sensible and intelligible* (2000–2002), where the outline of a vase/vessel is simply stitched on card, a classic geometric shape that may perhaps enclose 'the essence of the soul and this is the root of all knowledge.'[68]

The space or the environment that the body inhabits, the culture that encompasses it is also deeply significant. Vera Mõller creates both an architectural and a body space in *fluffalow* (2002), a mohair construction, incorporating windows and peepholes, that 'emphasises the ineffectiveness of interior space as a protected private zone (masquerade) and incorporates the dual processes of watching and being watched'[69]. And in *Imprint #3 (Second Series)* (2001), Beth Hatton speaks of the interaction of human agency with the environment as she weaves her kangaroo skin offcuts into a human fingerprint. Karin Lettau's *seams seems* (2001) is a 'garment for the soul', 'not about the body but about having a body'[70] and Jane Whiteley's *still life* (2002), a coat and wedding dress, conjure up a story of parents, people in special places, shapes in the wind of Rottnest Island: 'The extraordinary ordinariness of making'[71]. Sara Lindsay specifically references identity in her *Identikit #7* (2002), a comment on her life as a migrant, a work that, amongst other things, 'celebrates cloth as identifier – the flag, the badge, the uniform'[72]. And subversion lies in Annabelle Collett's *Swatches from the Agency* (2000–2002), a work which references the fashion and design industry alongside the most basic materiality of the body, by presenting swatches of gauzy feminine and delicate material, embroidered and decorated with 'beads, metal and trinkets but also bone, hair, chewing gum, toe nails and other ghastly found and collected objects.'[73]

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[67] R. Daw, *Material Witness*, 15th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial, Tamworth City Gallery, 2002. Following quotes also from this catalogue.
[68] ibid., artist statement.
[69] ibid., artist statement.
[70] ibid., artist statement.
[71] ibid., artist statement.
[72] ibid., artist statement.
[73] ibid., artist statement.

Conclusion

The development of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial is illustrative of the themes I have been exploring. The influence of feminism is evident in the ways that the foundations of the status quo are questioned. This relates to the status quo of the artworld and the division of work into art and craft, painting and textile, sculpture and fibre, drawing and photography. In the work that has been included throughout the annals of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial many of these methods and materials have been combined. Textile's power as a medium to clothe and to unite or demarcate groups of people has been referenced. A respect for multiplicity has been displayed through a respect for the textile expressions of various cultures.

Textile may be described in Foucault's terms as a discursive technique, a language that constructs. Foucault set out to analyse the construction of such techniques and the conditions of their existence. However, he was not concerned to produce a homogenous theory but to consider the disruptions, evidence of modifications and subversions within the discourses of power. Within society, under certain circumstances and under certain operations of power, textile, just as any other discursive technique, is used to 'inscribe, constitute and create bodies of particular types, with specific natures and capacities'[74]. Within the Tamworth Biennial the broad history of textile as a voice for the powerful in society has been acknowledged. However a consideration of work included in the Biennial has revealed the disruptions, the modifications and the subversions. Textile's accessibility as a material to the less powerful in society has been utilised as a medium to give expression to them. It has been demonstrated as having productive power.

The theme of identity and the medium of textile are demonstrably intertwined. The Tamworth City Gallery, through the Biennial, has adopted the fibre/textile medium as its raison d'etre in order to carve out an identifiable niche in the fine art world. My view is that a textile-specific exhibition such as the Tamworth Biennial has value in its focus upon the power of textile as a medium of expression, a language that may be used to speak a multiplicity of identities in inclusive, accessible and increasingly subversive

ways. The influence of feminist theory and philosophy and an aversion to prescription, a demand that the discourses of power and their operation are analysed and understood have had an influence in the art world. This exhibition's developmental strength lies in allowing artists to use the medium freely and in encouraging debate, not least about the constitution of the medium itself. Curatorial theses and theoretical analyses will facilitate a growing understanding and development of textile as a fine art medium and expressive language unconfined to any particular group; a medium that has a particular strength in addressing the political and social issues that often occupy artists.

In the following chapter, through an analysis of their responses to the artist questionnaire, I will explore the ways in which practitioners generally approach the medium of textile as a means of expression.

[74] E. Grosz, in Moore, op.cit., p.141.

Chapter Eight

ARTISTS AND THE TEXTILE TRADITION

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Liz Jeneid
***Terra Australia*, 1994**
4 artist's books, 10 objects, approx arranged in a two shelf wooden frame, pine timber, twigs, linen thread, tin, bitumen, paper, turpentine-release images

Source: *Crossing Borders: Contemporary Textile Art*, University of Wollongong, exhibition catalogue,1995

Chapter Eight

ARTISTS AND THE CONTEMPORARY TEXTILE TRADITION

In order to identify the interests of contemporary artists who use the medium of textile and why they choose to use it, I distributed a questionnaire as part of a conference package at *Shift 98*, a national contemporary textile symposium held in the Canberra School of Art in July 1998. Distributing the questionnaire at the symposium offered the opportunity to reach a large and representative section of the textile art community within Australia.

I designed my questionnaire with the following issues in mind:

- Why do contemporary artists use the medium of textile?
- What is the relationship between the way they use textile and the use of textile in both historical and contemporary society?
- Do contemporary textile artists have a social and political intent in their choice of medium? Is it their primary intent or in addition to other concerns?
- What constitutes textile art? Is it any art that uses the medium of textile in some way or is there some other influence at work?
- Does textile have a specific quality that goes beyond its material qualities?
- What is the effect of using common textile materials?

I followed up the distribution with a personal letter. I received 106 completed questionnaires from 174 artists canvassed. In addition, nine individuals wrote to inform me that they did not fit the criteria as they were now working either as a curator, researcher, fashion retailer, educator or art coordinator. One male respondent wrote to thank me for the survey. He had started to fill it out:

> ...but eventually I realised that I do not fit the profile of your survey target – i.e. I have been a textile *designer* for most of my working life and a teacher as well. I have worked on

> industry projects which are always commercial in intent, in fashion or furnishing applications. I have never believed myself to be an 'artist' – but a designer.[1]

There were eleven other artists who described themselves as designers, but who did attempt to fill out the questionnaire and whose answers have been included in my results. One person writes:

> I am sending this questionnaire back, although I have been unable to answer a lot of your questions. I am a designer rather than an artist, and so find questions relating to artistic practice difficult. Design tends to be driven by the market and economics, thus I cannot fit answers to your questions. I hope one day to have time to pursue 'art based' projects – but not right now!![2]

This provides some indication of the differing ways that practitioners approach their profession.

In the questionnaire I asked the artists to describe their art practice, their materials, their methods, their ideas (aesthetic or otherwise) and the significant aspects of the textile/fibre medium for them. Since the questions were open-ended, the analysis required was complex. The nature of the research allowed for qualitative rather then quantitative responses in order to explore more fully what is happening within individual artistic practice.

The artists listed many types of materials and a number of methods of working. Many use materials not traditionally associated with textile, including paint, wire, stainless steel, found objects,[3] as well as recycled clothing, feathers, sticks, and 'anything I can

[1] Personal correspondence, 1998.
[2] Personal correspondence, 1998.
[3] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 3, no. 10. 'At the moment my work is based on a process of collecting "things" – objects found, made, acquired/selected by a process which is both complex and fragile. These "things" "have become the players" in a narrative that "they" and I are writing.'

manipulate'[4]. Not all of this material relates directly to their textile practice but often to their use of drawing as a means to develop ideas and 'inform the work'[5].

Some of the artists work intuitively while others work in more structured ways, producing, for commercial sale, objects such as wraps and scarves, clothes, rugs, fabric lengths and, in one case, ecclesiastical pieces such as stoles, hangings and altar cloths. Many artists make both functional and non-functional items and, for some, the process of making is the important element –'a ritual in itself'[6]. One artist said, 'I mostly work from ideas of history/identity/tradition/ritual and use materials and techniques that act as metaphors for these'[7].

The list of working methods from respondents included various dyeing methods, printing, embroidery and appliqué, weaving, spinning and bone carving, as well as making artists' books, cards, banners and baskets. Artists are involved in collaborative work, performance and community artwork; they fulfil commissions, make both two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects and construct installations. They use computers for design purposes and computerised looms. One male artist works with the concept of virtual space:

> My art is conceptual in nature, is focused on the exploration of the male and his psyche. I work in a digital medium and so may be realised in virtual space. If I must 'physically' visualize it I choose print medium on paper and textiles.[8]

While this man obviously embraces contemporary technology, he notes the ability of textile 'to create meaning and evoke memories and associations.' He writes also that 'textile is the most wonderful medium and everyone 'lives' in cloth so everyone has some affinity, hence the associations'[9]:

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[4] ibid., no. 79.
[5] ibid., no. 97.
[6] ibid., no. 24.
[7] ibid., no. 24.
[8] ibid., no. 64.
[9] ibid., question 7, no. 64.

> Textile is so flexible as a medium. From sculptural form to dress, it allows the artist to explore so many possibilities. Variety and technological developments mean new possibilities. Its ability to be changed by process.[10]

For this artist, textile embraces history, tradition and universality as well as change, developmental flexibility and individual experiment. It is a material offering context and communication as well as enormous possibilities for extending both in relation to new ideas and visions.

While this particular artist works conceptually, generally speaking the actual word 'conceptual' cropped up rarely, although the suggestion of it was there in some of the other responses to the type of materials used. So, for instance, artists experiment with unusual materials such as flywire, perspex and human hair, or they try to develop new techniques: 'I use non-traditional materials but textile methods – e.g. I weave wire, plastics'[11]. Two artists were quite specific:

> The idea or concept usually comes first and then the materials and processes are chosen (or more likely present themselves) to augment that conceptual basis.[12]

> I develop an idea/concept/image and then find the right materials to realise that idea. Often I work with cardboard, paper, papier maché to work out ideas and often I assemble found materials. I trained as an actor. My work changes as I go along. There is always a lot of thinking, though. I mostly do appliqué in the textiles area.[13]

It is interesting to note the varied approaches in this regard, such that some artists are very sensitive to the material and how it 'speaks' to a particular message at a particular time within their practice. On the other hand, others seem to revel in an eclectic practice that brings its own rewards:

> My practice is diverse from sculpture using textile to decorative/domestic. 1. Installation – using textiles as the main material. 2. Screen printing and stitching on fabric – mainly for

[10]ibid., question 8, no. 64.
[11] ibid., question 3, no. 67.
[12] ibid., no. 77.
[13] ibid., no. 69.

> interiors and clothing, altho' [sic] I do some conceptual pieces. 3. Mixed media-using fibre/textile as part of the image. 4. For my own enjoyment and necessity – knitting, sewing, making toys etc.[14]

When I asked about the ideas (aesthetic or otherwise) that they were exploring, I hoped to identify the major concerns of artists working with textile – in other words, the connection between the medium and the artists' ideas. While there are few absolute conclusions to be drawn, some general comments can be made. For instance, thirteen per cent of the artists list as their major concern the technical aspects of the medium. Their comments included:

> The challenge of producing free form images on loom without resorting to tapestry. As well as using colour in an interesting and exciting way.[15]

> Trying as many options, combinations, explorations as I could manage. Techniques to record and materialise the ideas in my head Once done move onto the next.[16]

> My interest was the exploration of dyeing, using veg dyes (using native plants as I have a native garden) to alter the colours created by naphthol dyes. Much more subtle colours result.[17]

> Technique, ways of doing, less expressive. Initially design and colour ideas. Now look at structure as related to nature and society.[18]

Aesthetic concerns are implied in some of these answers and are of obvious interest to all visual artists. However, aesthetics figure more highly in the responses of a further 21.6 per cent of artists, some of whom answered as follows:

> Techniques, surface design images exploring positive and negative areas of surface. Images were important but linked to the pattern making of my textile design course – purely batik – mainly figurative.[19]

[14] ibid., no. 30.
[15] ibid., questions 5 & 6, no. 78.
[16] ibid., no. 82.
[17] ibid., no. 89.
[18] ibid., no. 13.
[19] ibid., no. 26.

> Concerned with texture, aesthetic concerns – composition – colours – balance – medium.[20]
>
> Main interest was and still is in the decorative nature of textile design. In the exploration and fascination in the design of pattern, the feeling of repeats – repetitive shapes and rhythms. The exciting nature and quality of the stitch. My work *never* has been political nor does it express social comment.[21]
>
> When first began I was interested in the aesthetics of the work as opposed to a concept.[22]

Conceptual concerns occupy over 57 per cent of the respondents. One of them writes, 'When I first began, conceptual art was popular and there was no focus on technique. We were encouraged to invent our own working methods in relation to our ideas'[23]. Overall their concerns range through the following 'life experiences':

- environment
- identity and 'personal mythology' and also personal philosophy and autobiography
- search for meaning
- emotional concerns and human relationships
- spirituality and religion
- political concerns – land rights and women's issues
- language and expression
- the body, sexuality and infertility
- passage of time
- symbolism
- nature of textiles
- mythology and folklore
- parallel universes
- communication and alienation
- social institutions eg family
- cultural influences

[20] ibid., no. 49.
[21] ibid., no. 95.
[22] ibid., no. 105.

Some of the artists (24.5%) write of their work as having been reflective in some way of environment, surroundings, place, landscape, land or nature. For some, the natural Australian landscape and its flora and fauna has been a key issue. One artist writes that in the 1980s she had an 'interest in expressing aspects of landscape through the use of rag fabrics and weave threadings – white and blue cotton in twills to depict the foam on waves for example'[24]. For others, 'environment' can be an 'abstract landscape'[25] or the subconscious, referring more to a sense of place. It is related to 'cultural identity'[26], a spiritual environment both communal and personal; it can be 'domestic'[27] or abroad'[28] or can relate to 'land rights'[29]. Landscape can act as either a political or an aesthetic stimulus and often these stimuli become intertwined. For these artists, the textile medium carries properties that allow them to speak directly to aspects of the environment: ''Strength and fragility in materials resonating these (sic) against the strength and fragility of the natural Australian environment.'[30] The idea of the fragility of textile mirroring the fragility of the environment is echoed elsewhere. One artist describes her interest in the Australian landscape 'first as a sculptor looking at repetition, form, space, negative space' and then moving into the textile medium as a result of these ideas: 'I felt the ideas were easier for me to translate onto textiles, becoming more iconic, textural and descriptive, therefore I changed the medium to suit my ideas.'[31] This conviction that textile (and, in one case, particularly embroidery) is an especially effective medium to speak of landscape emerges when artists write of 'earth surface and landscape interpretation'[32] and the 'direct reflection of diversity of materials and landscape, .ie. texture – form – surface'[33]. One artist writes of the strong connection between the landscape and the individual and of her concern to reproduce the sense of this experience 'not as a snapshot image pictorialising a

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[23] ibid., no. 52.
[24] ibid., no. 37.
[25] ibid., ibid, no. 96.
[26] ibid., no. 93.
[27] ibid., no. 54.
[28] ibid., no. 43.
[29] ibid., no. 30.
[30] ibid., no. 9.
[31] ibid., no. 38.
[32] ibid., no. 85.
[33] ibid., no. 86.

split second moment' but as a reflection of her 'total immersion' in land.[34] The concern here seems to be an appeal to more than just a visual sense. Other senses are brought into play so that the sensuous nature of textile becomes important.

Textile's relationship to the senses is taken up elsewhere. One artist specifically mentions 'the everyday feel of cloth' and refers to installation work she has made 'where touching the work prompted various sounds'[35] – a considered attempt to quite overtly link the human senses through the use of textile. The structure of fabric is equally reflective of the structure of society and nature. (It is interesting to note the many textile-related words which are used to describe social environment, such as the 'fabric of society', the 'rich tapestry of life'.)

For some artists the manipulation of technique *is* their conceptual concern:

> My concern is to draw attention to the ways of working in textiles, because I use non-traditional materials which are textiles (garden shade cloth, aluminium flywire). I want to make people wonder about these materials and realise textiles is very broad.[36]

Finally the notion of cloth as memory is significant. As an organic material it is seen as capable of storing information, of telling stories, of carrying history: 'Recent work has explored the ideas of "the life of cloth" – wear, tear, use, repair, darning and patching. Basically memory and cloth.'[37]

For nearly half of the artists their concerns had changed since they first began work. For some the changes are linked to an increased maturity and more experience of life within different environments:

> My 'concerns' evolve (rather than change) – 'it' is a process that is never still, like a journey – with a lot of backtracking – I make things in order to give form to the ways in

[34] ibid., no. 18.
[35] ibid., no. 74.
[36] ibid., no. 67.
[37] ibid., no. 101.

> which I respond to the world, whether these ways be visual, imaginative, physical or emotional.[38]
>
> My concerns have evolved over the years although there is a connecting thread. Because as one is informed by life then the work moves to new areas or direction.[39]

For most the work seems to become more personal, from 'changing world views/paradigms' to 'more personal exploration – landscape and the figure'[40], although one respondent writes, 'My original concerns were quite personal. They are now more universal'[41]. In fact, the actual process of making art is subject to constant change and many artists refer to the concepts of development and evolution to describe this process. Others respond with particular emphasis on the quest for the new: 'Yes, [my concerns have changed. I] look to new ways of expression relating to change in society, nature, etc. Today [I] look at exploring new techniques to create patterns and design'[42]. Some have changed their medium, having moved to textiles from painting or sculpture, while some artists express the change as having come about by moving from technical concerns to working in much more conceptual ways.

A few artists realised the potential of their textile activity for political expression, from a concern with representing the landscape through cloth to a concern with exploring the impact of human occupation of the land. However, the opposite proved true for one person:

> ...as I have matured so has my approach to my concerns. I still tend to be invited to 'shows' that are sexual or political in nature but I now approach life and art in a detached & bemused way. Humour is much more important to me. Controversy less so.[43]

For some, interests became broader and for others more focused, from wanting 'to explore everything' to exploring 'textile structures and [being] concerned with traditions

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[38] ibid., no. 10.
[39] ibid., no. 21.
[40] ibid. no. 14.
[41] ibid., no. 61.
[42] ibid., no. 13.
[43] ibid., no. 64.

and history expressed through textiles'[44]. For some, too, their need to earn a living from their work influenced a change of interest; for example, 'Still working generally with these aims [new ideas and developments for weaving] – but find the need to be commercial to achieve sales – restricts exploration of really weird stuff!'[45].

The significant aspects of (i) texture, (ii) techniques and processes and (iii) the ability to create meaning and evoke memories or associations were of importance to 76 per cent of artists questioned. These three aspects emerge as being closely related. One artist writes:

> Unique textures are available in textile and fibre materials. Again these are unique processes with endless effects and possibilities to be explored. I love our subconscious associations with cloth, stitch and interlacing [...] the warm, tactile, human qualities.[46]

Another notes that, 'All of the above [is] integral to work, requiring technical ability to realise concepts. Work has roots in tradition and spirituality but is expressed using materials demanded by concept'[47]. For some, the technique *is* the metaphor. Texture and tactility are the essence of textile: '...texture touches us in a pre-language way – if that makes sense [sic] we have a *gut* reaction to it. Texture inhabits the work and we have an *emotional* reaction to it'[48]. Texture is seen as a quality almost exclusive to textile: 'Texture and colour within threads create a "life" and character within the work unobtainable with any other medium'[49] and '[Texture is] very important, almost the essence of textiles, what makes it rich, gives depth'[50]. Also mentioned quite frequently is the affinity of textile with the body, its associations with life's experiences. Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents noted that practical reasons had something to do with their choice of medium.

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[44] ibid., no. 71.
[45] ibid., no. 84.
[46] ibid., question 7, no. 15.
[47] ibid., no. 31.
[48] ibid., no. 30.
[49] ibid., no. 39.
[50] ibid., no. 45.

Artists gave other reasons for working with textile. Colour was significant. Some artists, for example, were able to produce colours that were reminiscent of landscape. Other reasons were:

- History and tradition
- The connections between technology and textiles – new possibilities
- Personal connections/affinity/understanding
- Links in time and space to other cultures and people throughout history
- Versatility, ability to cross boundaries
- Evocative and anecdotal
- Associations with gender and domesticity: 'Women have a 20,000 year history of textile practice. I am working in a long tradition established by a (maternal) family line.'[51]
- Association of 'rag fabrics' with 'the poor, disenfranchised, disadvantaged – I like to make them *speak* for these groups.'[52]
- Wearable and utilitarian. 'Protective: Wrapping the body.'[53]
- Applicable for performance work
- Ability to be 'draped, folded'[54]
- Three-dimensional – creating an object rather than depicting it. Multi-dimensional
- The possibility of distortion and manipulation
- Lustrous, seductive, tactile, rich
- 'Its ability to be changed by process'[55]
- Meticulous nature of the process
- Both traditional and challenging
- Practical and/or decorative
- Portable
- The everyday. 'You are born into textiles, you die in textiles, it comes naturally'[56]
- 'It evokes passion from within'[57].

[51] ibid., question 8, no. 31.
[52] ibid., no. 37.
[53] ibid., no. 55.
[54] ibid., no. 45.
[55] ibid., no. 64.
[56] ibid., no. 94.

There is so much contained within these comments: the notion of something steeped in history and tradition, yet capable of being changed and used to challenge orthodoxies; something lustrous and rich yet also practical and part of everyday living. The idea is strong that being part of everyday living offers so much that is evocative and nourishing, tells so many stories, of so many people, in so many places, and of such varied times. Textile is perceived as having an ability to encompass the past, the present and the future.

The artists were asked whether they used textile as a first choice of material or whether simply as one amongst others. In other words, did the artist see textile as a medium of primary importance? The answers range from those who use only textile/fibre because of the associations it carries to those who use any material required to bring their concept to fruition. Thus one respondent writes, 'It is the primary choice of material because of daily associations and because of ready availability'[58] and another artist notes that 'I chose every material for its own value and whether it aids me getting across my concept the best – I have no more affinity to one material than to any other'[59]. In contrast to this, one comment was also made to the effect that the medium was secondary to the image: 'I always use textile (yarns) because I rather use [sic] the imagery to communicate my meaning rather than the type of media used'[60]. A couple of respondents specifically argued against the notion of limitation to a particular material/medium[61].

Fifteen per cent of the respondents noted that they use primarily textile but often in association with other materials such as paper, plastic, found objects and metal. One says that she does this in order to give the work shape, stability, emphasis. Another writes that she likes to combine textile with other mediums to create a hybrid form 'that could not be described as either weaving or drawing'[62]. One writes that, while textile has always been a first choice, wood was now of interest as a sculptural medium. She notes that 'textile is

[57] ibid., no. 95.
[58] ibid., question 9, no. 102.
[59] ibid., no. 18.
[60] ibid., no. 76.
[61] ibid., no. 93.
[62] ibid., no. 35.

essentially a "touch" experience and because of its 3D surface creates unique patterns of light and shade'[63]. Another artist comments that:

> My work is based on textile. Sometimes I use non traditional materials to make textiles eg. wire, sticks etc & sometimes I use textiles as the end result. However there is always a reference to textile in my work.[64]

This comment is of interest because of the inference that the essence of textile is as constructed medium: that is to say, it is the construction and the technique that results in the medium of textile. Thus wire and sticks become textile through this process.

Sixty-three per cent of the artists use textile as a their first, and sometimes only, choice of medium, although they do experiment with varied materials, threads and methods. One writes that the 'medium chose me. There is a response to material that comes natural [sic] to me with fibre'.[65] This feeling was echoed by other references to 'passion', 'familiarity', 'fundamental connection' and 'technical interest', and there are references also to flexibility, sensitivity, intensity of colour and range of textures, especially in reference to silk.

Because my research arose from my curiosity about traditional ceremonial textile, I asked artists about their concept of tradition and its significance. Three artists did not answer this question and six artists answered that tradition meant little or nothing. Fourteen per cent of the respondents were generally dismissive of the concept of tradition but this was well in the minority.

The others responded in a variety of ways. Many spoke of tradition in very general and broad terms with very few specific references to any personal influences. For example:

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[63] ibid., no. 34.
[64] ibid., no. 71.
[65] ibid., no. 49.

> Traditional, in a general sense, means having a history and therefore is a carrier of meaning and a link to practitioners of the past. Creates a sense of belonging. It helps to influence and inform me as the maker and hopefully influence and inform the 'viewer/user'.[66]
>
> I live in the world *now* but my ways of thinking and seeing have grown out of a history – to which I must always *refer*.[67]

For some, tradition was a source of great significance. For instance, one artist wrote that 'It is wholly important as (i) a woman artist, (ii) my interest in historical costume' and that its influence on her work was very strong: 'Yes as I spend a lot of time in museums gaining inspiration, the historical value of fabric and the relationship of it to "women's work" is all part of the relevant [sic] of me using textile'[68]. And another artist wrote that 'Tradition is vital to my practice [sic] as it is one of the major concerns in my exploration of identity and geneology [sic].'[69] The tradition for some of these women is the relationship to other women and domestic work, although only nine of the respondents specifically mentioned this aspect. One artist notes that tradition for her meant:

> Maintaining a sense of the fabric – the construction of a fabric (included in this I mean also lace and embroidery) in a textile piece. I can accept paper and bark in this definition but not plastics. Tradition also equals a RESPECT for the history of fabric construction and a textile craft. TRADITION in textiles = a marriage of practicality + good design.[70]

Another artist discussed the concept of clothing/wrapping the body and the notion of textile as a language that allows one to speak in particular ways:

> It means the input of many 'artists' which different circumstances, materials, cultures (sic). A huge commonality is clothing – wrapping our bodies. This is a common language. Full of significant [sic] to tradition and way of life.[71]

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[66] ibid., questions11 and 12, no. 61.
[67] ibid., no. 10.
[68] ibid., no. 18.
[69] ibid., no. 24.
[70] ibid., no. 95.
[71] ibid., no. 55.

Technique, craftsmanship and skill figure strongly for some artists. They feel that only by knowing the basic skills and developing strong technical expertise could they develop as artists, telling their own stories but in new ways. For example: 'I have learnt from the traditional practices but I extend the boundaries, use the knowledge gained as the beginning of my expression.'[72] For one or two artists the sense of tradition was very much about the use of natural materials: 'Means old techniques, traditional fibres – natural, a great user and believer in natural fibres – animal and vegetable.'[73]

Most artists referred to the sense of history that tradition conjures up, a sense of context and connection with other people and other ages, a feeling of building upon this:

> It's important as a way of contextualising my work. I see my own practice as related to and informed by the European tradition of woven tapestry. But my work has also been influenced by other discourses like feminism and recent critiques of landscape.[74]

The traditions of other cultures were also of significance to this sense of connection. Occasionally, responses indicated an almost mystical reverence for tradition and for ongoing cultural practice, a feeling that these varied cultural traditions added huge and inspirational diversity to the medium. The significance of ritual and the potential of textile to carry meaning were also mentioned, for example:

> Cultural significance. Textiles play a major role in ritual, ceremony, daily life in all cultures. Unfortunately the value of this role is not more recognised. I guess this is one of the reasons *why* I work with textiles. They hold so much meaning – and are useful.[75]

A common thread, too, is the sense of not being bound by the past and by tradition, the idea that tradition is a two-way process. One artist described tradition thus:

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[72] ibid., no. 73.
[73] ibid., no. 82.
[74] ibid., no. 54.
[75] ibid., no. 84.

> Traditions relating to embroidery are very important to me because I can feel that as a woman, I belong to something that is bigger than the present. I also incorporate feminist theory into my work, which validates textiles and crafts.[76]

and went on to say that:

> It is important as an ongoing practice that records and influences culture. I incorporate computers and sewing machines into my practice as I feel that tradition is not just the past, it is also the present.[77]

There was a strong feeling that tradition is there as an informative guide, not as a restrictive rule, not to be flouted and ignored but to be extended into new directions. Or the artist might acknowledge and appreciate traditional experiences of textile but then simply get on with their own work in their own contemporary way. A number of artists stated that they had developed their own techniques to suit their own particular needs:

> [Tradition] not important – I have possibly developed my own techniques, within a framework of traditional methods – but not of interest to me.[78]

> [Tradition is] critical. In making personal choices about technical and aesthetics aspects of my work. In knowing the tradition I can deviate from it.[79]

The theme of identity has underscored the ideas I have pursued throughout this thesis. One artist's comments are particularly pertinent to this and seem to encapsulate the themes I have explored:

> Textiles are intrinsically linked with the human condition since almost the beginning of human existence, thus I feel a natural affinity with them for the long tradition of identifying of a culture and the story telling practice. My art practice is a continuation of ancient traditions of telling a story and finding my own identity through the medium of textiles.[80]

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[76] ibid., no. 33.
[77] ibid.
[78] ibid., no. 38.
[79] ibid., no. 53.
[80] ibid., no. 39.

Chapter Nine

IN CONCLUSION

Photograph removed for copyright or proprietary reasons

Patrick Snelling
When you come to a Border, Cross It

Source: *Origins and New Perspectives. Contemporary Australian Textiles,* Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, exhibition catalogue, 1998

Chapter Nine

IN CONCLUSION

I have written this thesis because of a deep interest in the political nature of art, because I have a strong personal connection with the medium of textile and because I wanted to add something of significance to the critical debate and art historical context of textile as art form. I have chosen to focus my discussion around Western ceremonial textile because it is closely associated with the impact and use of power. Initially, I was also concerned about a prevailing view that textile practice is significant only for women. Women and power have historically been disassociated. I have recognised the immense and lasting effects of feminist philosophies upon both art and the broader social environment. I believe that textile is a powerful medium of expression whose influence, like that of women themselves, cannot be confined to the domestic space. I consider that textile's role within Western corridors of power, so to speak, was being ignored within contemporary art historical analysis, possibly because of a patriarchal context. In this study I have illustrated that, for both men and women, textile has regularly been useful as an emblem of power, whether in sanctioned ceremonial terms, as in church banners or military regalia, in statements of solidarity such as trade union banners, or in acts of defiance, such as the Eureka Flag. I have demonstrated that, throughout history, textile has been a medium strongly associated with the creation and maintenance of an identity, either congruent with the social status quo or assumed as an expression of subversion and opposition.

I have discussed textile as it relates to Australian social and political history and culture. I have contemplated the impact of some significant contemporary theories, most particularly those of French philosopher, Michel Foucault, and the social scientist, Kenneth Boulding, about the use and effect of power. For Foucault, the fascination of power lies in its manifestations, in the way that it has functioned. He recognises its

potential for positive effect through disruption and subversion rather than simply through repression. For Boulding, too, the greatest power lies not in oppression but in integration, which is social power, the power to bind people together for a common purpose. This is the kind of power with which I have identified textile by distinguishing the ways that textiles have been used to unite people, to give them a sense of importance, a sense of identity. I have been particularly concerned with the political nature of textiles and, in a related way, the politics of art. Consequently, I have considered the impact of textile related to ceremony and ritual within Australian society in ways intended to be constructive and inclusive. Australia's particular social history has been examined, steeped as it is in convict and colonial connections. I have addressed the role of women within this history and considered their textile artefacts in ways that illustrate women's largely unreported involvement with, and significant influence on, the development of Australia's social context – society's 'God's Police' in Anne Summers' terms. My discussion has extended to the interplay of these social elements with textile produced as art, as well as the development of textile art within Australia and its standing within the visual art world. In relation to both the art world and the wider social context I have discussed the role of textile as a medium for subversion, a deconstructive language.

The artist questionnaire results indicate that contemporary artists are highly aware of and make good use of the associative quality of textile. This quality affords textile enormous power and potential as a medium in contemporary art practice. To disregard textile's wider connotations within society, to connect it only with a feminine domestic idiom, is to deny its impact within the structure of society in general. That same premise in a wider philosophical sense has also denied the impact of the role of women in the broad structure of society.

I was interested to explore the affinity that artists have with their medium. I had initially felt that textile artists were very protective of their medium. It had seemed, based upon evidence of the use that feminism has made of textile, that textile as an art form helped to create an identity for many 'textile' artists. While I was initially concerned by the characterisation of textile as a feminine pursuit, it does seem from my research that at

least some women are very protective of their medium. They do regard it as a site for self-expression, as a space where their concerns are paramount, as a personal language untainted by the power structures inherent in other forms of expression, the power structures associated with the public space. Many claim it as a feminine voice, an *écriture féminine* in Irigaray's terms or a language with a special relationship to women and it is undeniable that many of the artists who use the medium and are closely associated with it are women. As artist, Antoinette Carrier writes, 'Plastic for me speaks of domesticity, invisibility, transparency and lowliness – all attributes imposed on me as woman, migrant and textile worker'[1]. The use of the medium in the public space of an art exhibition, the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial empowers its users. Only two artists of the 106 who responded to my questionnaire identified themselves as male, although, as we have seen, male artists have achieved recognition for their work with the medium and do consider it as rich in association and meaning.

On the other hand, it must be said that the questionnaire results do not emphatically and fully support such a close female and political identification with the medium. The answers to question four (how artists classify themselves and whether the classification is important) reveal a number of elements and motivations at work and it is difficult to construct a clear picture. Those who state that the classification is important (44) and those who state that it is not (41) number roughly the same. The remaining 21 replies are not specific. The reasoning behind the answers reveals a complexity of thought. There are those who approach what they do in a purely practical and almost utilitarian sense, in that the description of what they do reflects more than anything the materials they use. So one self-designated artist/textile artist describes her reasoning thus: 'The difference between the two I feel shows I have other areas of interest other [sic] than textiles, e.g. painting, graphics.'[2]

There are others who are aware of the political ramifications of their label and who use this accordingly. For example: 'I tailor it to who I'm speaking/writing to – different

[1] A. Carrier, artist statement, *Many Voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial*, exhibition catalogue 1998, p.9.

people have different thoughts about "artist", "designer", "fibre", "weaver" etc. These words carry connotations.'[3] (This from a person who calls herself sometimes a textile practitioner or textile designer or just weaver.) This plays upon the idea that identity matters but sometimes can be compromising. In fact one artist who works with fibre expressed the view in a recent personal conversation that the term 'textile artist' is almost the kiss of death within the art world. On the other hand, a relatively small number of people use the term 'textile' (and related terms such as fibre artist or weaver) in their self-designation advisedly and with the express purpose of affirming their tradition and its special qualities. Others who use the term 'textile artist' do so with no sense of its importance. One textile artist says,' Only the artist part' is important.[4] Another textile artist writes, 'No (the classification is unimportant) -- except that once I would describe myself as a weaver but now my interests are broader'[5]. It is interesting to note that while some see the term 'textile artist' as limiting, for this person it obviously reflects a greater freedom. Hence the complexity in analysis of the results! One respondent, self-classified as 'textile artist/mixed media artist but mostly textile artist', sees the term 'artist' as restrictive:

> 'Artist' has painting/drawing connotations and I don't do those. Fibre suggests just plant materials and I use more than that. Mixed media is nice and broad but tends towards the 'painting, drawing' end of 'artist'.[6]

Finally, there are those who feel that the designation has no importance at all. They use the term 'artist' or 'visual artist' because these terms are all-encompassing and provide a freedom in the expression of their ideas: 'My work is primarily about ideas rather than about a media [sic]'[7]; or 'Important only in the sense that one makes art using the most appropriate and sympathetic materials available to do the job'[8]. For some, the term then becomes important precisely because it is non-restrictive:

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[2] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 12.
[3] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 99.
[4] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no 42.
[5] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 63.
[6] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 58.
[7] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 61.
[8] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 35.

> I don't like to be categorised. Textile artist is often interpreted amongst the uninitiated as tapestry/weaver – the limit of the interpreter's knowledge usually. I often go to vague and lengthy descriptions to dispel any preconceptions of what I do. [I] find it rather hard to comprehend myself![9]

While some think the description is very important but for different reasons:

> This has always been a sensitive issue. The words fibre and textile have immediate connotations for most people and tapestry has multiple meanings so if I call myself anything these days it is artist with further clarification if necessary. But no the classification should not be important – the work is. (Tapestry artist)[10]

Another respondent, who describes herself as an artist and lace maker, says about the importance of the descriptive label:

> Not in defining oneself for others, but I think it is important to see oneself within a tradition. I do consider myself an artist, however I am also aware of the need to bring lace making into a contemporary context, and the need to see the skills of crafts people as valuable to arts practice. I am not ashamed to call myself a crafts person.[11]

The concern regarding perceptions of craft is echoed elsewhere in the survey results, as in the case of the person expressly designated a textile artist who writes:

> Yes [the classification is important]. I am specifically interested in the history and traditions of textiles. I do not identify with the fine arts tradition although I have read a great deal about it. I feel that textiles challenge the fine arts tradition.[12]

This comment reflects the feminist principles outlined by theorists such as Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin, who argue that women's artwork, including textile, could

[9] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 19.
[10] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 8.
[11] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 79.
[12] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 37.

only ever be evaluated as art if the cultural norms were challenged and restructured[13]. However, this textile artist's stance is not a position adopted by the majority. It seems that in contemporary times women just want to make art and not be confined to a particular identity that creates certain preconceptions and forces them to work in prescribed ways. One well-known 'visual artist working in woven tapestry' writes with considerable perspicacity:

> While classification can be limiting the context in which the work is shown *is* important. While I don't mind being called a craftsperson, I usually call myself a visual artist. The area in which I work is on the border between the visual arts and craft – quite a productive space but not easily defined. My thinking has been informed by discourses from both the crafts and visual arts. I would position my work in relation to the European tapestry tradition and contemporary Australian culture.[14]

In many ways such divergent views reflect the similar concerns about feminism, examined earlier in Chapter One – how one *is* a feminist and the necessity to accommodate complexity and multiplicity. These views seem to be a reaction to the hegemonic dichotomies or binary oppositions which have been used to structure the functioning of societies and the role of women within them – the dichotomies of male/female, public/private, reason/emotion and independence/dependence and the positive/negative associations with each.[15] I have shown how in the 1980s a similar kind of reasoning surfaced within the visual arts world around the issue of art/craft and textile's 'appropriate' identity. For so long textile had been marginalised as 'decorative' and 'functional' with no claim to intellectual content. My discussion and historical analysis of the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial shows that its impact has been to question the foundations of this argument and establish textile as a conceptual medium of standing within the fine art world. As part of this process the medium of textile has become increasingly chameleon-like in terms of the materials that qualify and the methods used. While debate still occurs around the materiality of the medium as opposed

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[13] R. Parker & G. Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, Pandora Press (Harper Collins), London, 1981; L. Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?', in *Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds V. Gornick & B. Moran, New York, 1971.

[14] Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, question 4, no. 54.

to its conceptual basis, it is this that has given both textile and the Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial their significance. Textile's power as discourse is exponentially increased the greater its referential possibilities. Artists reference the use of textile in both ceremonial and domestic contexts but refuse to be limited to traditional meanings.

Foucault, in his study of specific forms of power and the discourses through which power is articulated, allows for the disruptions, the interruptions and challenges to the continuity of a discourse. In fact this is exactly the kind of discourse in which artists are regularly involved.[16] My argument is that the medium of textile fits Foucault's conception of a discursive technique in that, with particular reference to the ceremonial, textile can be demonstrated as being 'bound up within the order of power'. Again, according to Foucault, real constructive power, which can act as a force for good, arises from an ability to be disruptive and subversive. For Foucault, the existence of power always carries with it the real possibility of the rejection of that power, the possibility of subversion or the expression of individual freedom. Power 'needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression'[17]. Thus the power of textile arises both from an original social and political context and the ability to subvert that context by utilising the medium in deconstructive ways. Whether as material or technique, textile derives its power and influence as a discursive medium of contemporary art wherever context is referenced.

My argument is that thinking about textile in terms of its power as a medium of 'identity' allows for 'multiplicity'. Further that considering power as constructive rather than repressive allows for inclusion, not prescription. It permits textile as a medium in contemporary art to be highly relevant and difficult to marginalise. Art and life are

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[15] This thesis, Introduction & Chapter One

[16] See for example Appendix 3: Questionnaire Results, questions 11 and 12, no 104. This artist writes that 'I have enjoyed exploring a variety of textile techniques that are traditional in certain areas of the world and exploring and extending them to suit my work/materials.

[17] P. Rabinow, op. cit., p.61.

intimately connected, as Robert Rauschenberg famously believed.[18] Textile embodies people. If textile can be theorised in terms of identity then, particularly in contemporary times when identity is an issue of widespread interest, textile becomes not simply a feminine pursuit or a female oriented medium, but instead has meaning for all of us, whether male or female, artist or not. Textile has the capacity to speak a very expansive language indeed if we are prepared to acknowledge its wider possibilities. This has been the foundation of my thesis – to draw attention to and analyse the wider use of textile in the public space and to argue against its limitation to the realms of a simple domesticity. In addition, to recognise, as feminists such as Anne Summers and modern historians such as Grace Karskens have done, that the strict separation of space into public and private spheres and the identification of one with power and influence and one with neither, is an over-simplification of the historical reality of a society structured by many ordinary people. Similarly, in general terms the medium of textile paints a powerfully broad perspective and speaks with many and varied voices. The Tamworth Fibre Textile Biennial is a reflection of this within the Australian contemporary art world.

[18] Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg/Art and Life*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1990, p.89. Rauschenberg was deeply influenced by the philosophy of musician, John Cage:

> For Cage and Rauschenberg, the purpose of art was not to create enduring masterpieces for an elite, but to further a perpetual process of discovery in which everyone could participate. They wanted to break down all barriers between art and life. Rauschenberg wrote, "Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)"

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